NOVEMBER 2012
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91 PRODUCTS REVIEWED!

choice

THE PEOPLE'S WATCHDOG

ING OF THE KITCHEN
hermomix takes on
ie pretenders

EEDING
LUFFY
at and dog
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AILY BUZZ
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ESTS
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amcorders
igital cameras
martphones
VRs
attery chargers

Port in the storm

Power bills are going up and mortgages are coming down, but CHOICE remains a steady advocate for consumers

The cost of living has dominated conversations both on the national stage and around our barbecues over the past few months – particularly the topics of rising electricity prices and falling interest rates.

Like everyone I know, I experienced a wave of disbelief when I opened my most recent electricity bill. We live in a pretty efficient home and use gas for cooking, heating and hot water, so it was impossible to believe our electricity bill could be so high – and still rising.

Since hitting the airwaves to talk about this issue, it has struck me that the level of community concern about price increases is in inverse proportion to our understanding of what is driving them. It is virtually impossible for consumers to understand what is going on in the electricity market and even more difficult to compare the plans on offer from different retailers.

The main reason for this is that our system of energy price regulation is broken. That's why we launched our Take the Power Back campaign (**choice.com.au/takethepowerback**), calling on our federal, state and territory governments to fix this problem. Thanks to the more than 3000 people who have signed up so far.

Unlike electricity, with mortgages we're seeing costs going down rather than up, but the problems for consumers are very similar. Despite the Reserve Bank cutting the official rate, the big four banks, who have 80% of our mortgage business, dragged their feet and ultimately failed to pass on the full rate cut.

The banks try to confuse us by talking about how difficult it is for them to get access to cash. The Reserve Bank says this is less of a problem than it has been in the past. The net result of all of this is lots of angry, confused and disappointed customers.

What has struck me about these two issues is just how important it is for there to be a strong voice on the side of consumers. Only CHOICE is able to strip away the marketing hype and look at the evidence with one simple question in mind: what does it all mean for you, the consumer?

That's the question that we apply to everything that we do – and that's what makes CHOICE unique. This month, we apply that thinking to everything from men's undies to the Thermomix – so whatever lights your fire, there's sure to be plenty of handy advice inside for you!

Alan Kirkland, CEO
Phone: 1800 266 786
Email: alan@choice.com.au
Twitter: @AlanKirkland

For general membership and consumer enquiries, phone 1800 069 552

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CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. We pay full price for all the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry. We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by subscriptions to our magazines, **choice.com.au** and from other services we supply to benefit members and consumers. CHOICE product ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. CHOICE staff also research a wide range of consumer services. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

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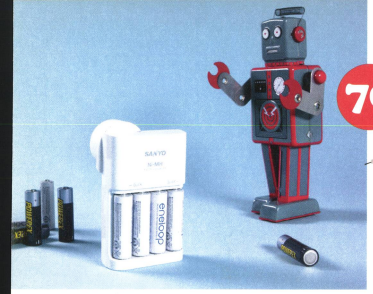

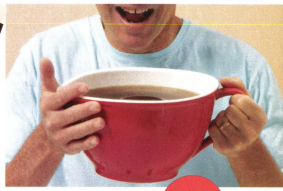

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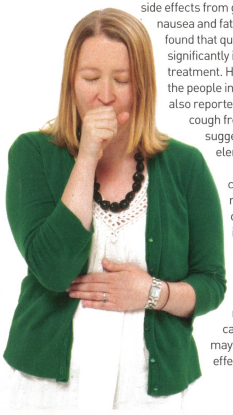
CHOICE's Elise Dalley is naturally sceptical

Coughing up relief

The epilepsy and neuropathic pain drug gabapentin may effectively relieve chronic cough, a post-infectious cough lasting more than eight weeks, according to Australian researchers.

In some cases, chronic cough appears to be caused by a malfunction in the brain's cough centre, and gabapentin acts on the central nervous system by stabilising electrical activity. There were side effects from gabapentin – mainly nausea and fatigue – but the study found that quality of life was significantly improved with drug treatment. However, almost half the people in the placebo group also reported improvement in cough frequency and severity, suggesting a psychological element is involved.



Chronic cough is fairly common, with the authors reporting a prevalence of up to 11-16%. It's important to note that the cough may have an underlying medical cause, which should be ruled out before trying medication. Experts caution that gabapentin may cause more serious side effects, such as hallucinations.

KARINA BRAY

479

Number of complaints received by NSW Fair Trading about wedding goods and services in 2010/11

498

Number of complaints received in 2011/12

Marital discord

Top 10 complaints:

1 dresses
2 videos
3 photos
4 venues
5 flowers
6 rings
7 cars
8 make-up
9 catering
10 suits

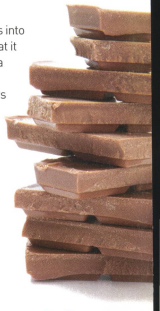
Weird winnings

Nestlé UK has inserted GPS trackers into chocolate bars sold in the UK so that it can track down competition winners of a £10,000 booty.

The company promises to find winners anywhere on UK land to deliver the prize. "The bar will transmit signals to our Squad Team from the moment it is activated," the terms and conditions state. "Our Squad Team will find your location within 24 hours using a variety of ways, GPS being one of them."

To avoid a midnight surprise, Nestlé will only attempt to find the winners between 7am and 10pm.

ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH



BREAKING NEWS

Online frenzy

In a bid to reinvigorate the sluggish retail environment before year's end, up to 200 online retailers are expected to take part in Australia's inaugural online sales event, Click Frenzy. Modelled on the successful US-based online supersale Cyber Monday, the event, to be held on Tuesday 20 November, is expected to attract up to a million shoppers. For more, visit clickfrenzy.com.au.

Join the queue

Wait times of a year or more may be on the cards if you're in the queue for elective surgery at a public hospital. The latest Australian Institute of Health and Welfare statistics show that about 662,000 patients were admitted in 2011-12. Half of them were seen within 36 days, but it took up to 251 days for 90% on the waiting list to see a surgeon. The longest wait time was for knee replacements, which meant about 76,792 Australians had to be very patient patients.

Juiced-up claim

A research review has found cranberry juice is not effective at preventing bladder and kidney infections, as it's been claimed to be. The Cochrane Library reviewed 24 studies with over 4000 participants/ They found that although there were minor benefits for some women who were suffering from recurring urinary tract infections, to prevent a single instance of infection, two glasses of juice would have to be consumed daily over long periods of time.

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO

Power campaign charges up

CHOICE recently appeared before a Senate inquiry that has just released its report on the key causes of electricity price increases and possible solutions that will help lower energy bills for Australian households.

We called on energy ministers to work together to adopt major reforms before the end of 2012 that will help lower energy bills. This was following our nationally representative survey of more than 1000 household energy decision-makers who, for the most part, had low levels of satisfaction with their electricity retailer and found it difficult to navigate the plethora of electricity retail plans available (See *CHOICE*, October 2012).

Energy ministers will drag their feet if Australians don't get behind the push for energy reform. To let them know you expect action now and see our written submission to the Senate, go to **choice.com.au/takethepowerback**. KATRINA LEE

First-home help

The Mortgage & Finance Association of Australia recently warned consumers that qualifying for a First Home Owner Grant (FHOG) is becoming trickier.

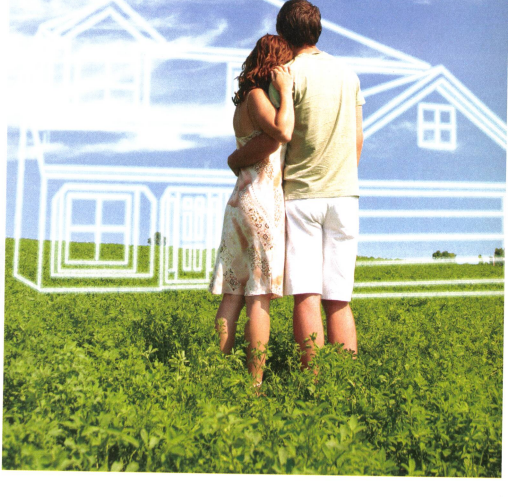
In Queensland, the grant rose from $7000 to $15,000 in September for first-home buyers purchasing a newly constructed or off-the-plan property, but the $7000 grant for an existing dwelling vanished in October.

The NSW government made a similar move in October, replacing its $7000 FHOG with a $15,000 grant for new homes. Victoria's plan is the most generous as well as the curliest: the state offers a $15,000 FHOG plus a 50% cut in stamp duty for new properties worth up to $600,000, phased in over four years.

SA's grant scheme has been all over the place lately. As of mid October, the FHOG jumped from $7000 to $15,000 for new homes and is set to drop from $7000 to $5000 for established ones when the legislation takes effect (not specified at time of publication). State support for established homes will be abolished on 1 July 2014.

There's also still support for first-time buyers in WA, where the grant was recently cut down to $7000.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN



Can you help?

Many people are turning to non-surgical anti-ageing skin treatments such as laser resurfacing, chemical peels, ultrasound, light therapy and the like. Have you seen an ad for one these therapies and want to know more? Or have you tried a treatment yourself? We'd like to hear about what you're interested in and your experiences with these therapies for an upcoming story. Please contact ***investigations@choice.com.au****.*

Seal of approval

BREVILLE THE SOUS VIDE
PRICE $800
CONTACT breville.com.au

If you're a fan of cooking shows, you may be familiar with the sous vide technique. It involves vacuum-sealing food and then heating the pouches at a controlled temperature over a period of time. CHOICE checked out the Breville Sous Vide and, because you need a food sealer to use it, Breville's Fresh Keeper BVP700.

The Sous Vide is bulky and takes up considerable counter space. It has an 11L water tank and its water temperature defaults to 60°C, although you can set the temperature to 83.5°C. (It takes an hour to get that hot, however.)

Cooking times vary depending on the thickness of the food. While tender meat can be ready in an hour, tougher cuts take six to eight hours. Since different foods require different temperatures, meat and vegetables can't be cooked at the same time. After cooking in the Sous Vide, most meats will need to be browned to lift the appearance and caramelise the outside.

Filling the Sous Vide with water is easy, and while there's no steam during cooking, condensation does build up and drip onto the bench when you remov the lid. The instructions are fairly comprehensive and the controls are easy to use, with a clear and bright digital display. Since there is only water residue, the Sous Vide is very easy to clean unless a cooking pouch happens to rupture, which is unlikely. The stainless steel exterior may require extra attention when cleaning.

Breville's Fresh Keeper BVP700 is easy to use – simply position the bag correctly, making sure there is no food or residue near the opening of the bag, and press down on the unit. After about 20 seconds, most of the air is removed, and a further five to 10 seconds will seal the bag. While it works well to remove air and seal food, our home economist, Fiona Mair, found it to be a bit hit and miss at times. It pays to ensure the bag is correctly positioned and press down on both sides for a better seal.

CHOICE verdict

Like a slow cooker, the Sous Vide can cook tender and flavoursome foods while you're out. But while a slow cooker produces a completed dish, if you're using the Sous Vide you'll need to add the final touches after it's done. It's also expensive and bulky, so consider your available space first. **REBECCA CIARAMIDARO**

BREVILLE THE FRESH KEEPER BVP700
PRICE $130
CONTACT breville.com.au

Terminating unfair fees

ASIC has reviewed 20 lenders and found more potential culprits in unfair lender fees, after RHG (formerly RAMS) was made to refund its customers $3.3m in what was deemed unfair early home loan termination and discharge fees earlier this year.

Early termination fees on new variable home loans have been banned since 1 July 2011 but still apply to many loans taken out before that date. Early exit fees are considered unconscionable if they aren't reduced over time, are calculated based on the loan amount, and do not account for any refunds of commissions paid to mortgage brokers.

If you're charged an early termination fee, it's worth making a complaint to the lender. While only one per cent of consumers who were charged this fee did, more than half of them had their fees waived or reduced. **UTA MIHM**

Package rage?

If you've ever bought something that is impossible to open because of excessive or impenetrable packaging, there is a place to vent your frustrations. The Australian Packaging Covenant (APC) provides a mechanism to make a complaint and receive advice.

The APC represents the commitment by more than 800 signatories (business and industry, government and non-government) to work together to reduce the environmental impacts of packaging across the packaging supply chain and aims to ensure all play their part in reducing packaging waste.

To contact the APC, head to packagingcovenant.org.au or call 1300 308 030. **KATE BROWNE**

Proper petrol pricing

Petrol stations in NSW will be required to display prices for LPG, diesel and the top two-selling fuels for that service station, as part of a new standard for the regulation of petrol price boards announced by NSW Fair Trading Minister Anthony Roberts at a lively meeting attended by the NRMA, representatives of the service station industry and CHOICE.

The prices must be displayed without any discounts or special offers. Roberts says the new standards will help consumers make the quick decision to purchase fuel. "Under the new arrangements, people will no longer be confused or misled by advertised prices based on shopper docket discounts and other special offers from service station operators." Service stations have one year from 1 September 2012 to implement the new signage.

CHOICE supports the new standard in NSW, but also advocates for a national standard to be adopted. The ACCC recently announced it will consider this.

JODI BIRD

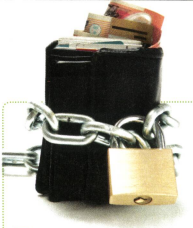
Monkey business

Exposing rhesus monkeys to bisphenol A (BPA) – a chemical used to make polycarbonate plastic bottles and line food cans to prevent corrosion – causes serious problems with their reproductive systems, interfering with sex cell formation and the development of ovaries, according to a US study.

Professor Brian Priestly, director of the Australian Centre for Human Health Risk Assessment at Monash University, says the study is significant because it replicates findings previously observed in rodents "but using primates that are more similar with respect to human reproductive physiology".

However, other experts have warned that while the study is of high quality, it has limitations. For example, some monkeys are continuously exposed to BPA via an implant, a model that more closely replicates human exposure than a one-off mode of administration. But according to Dr Ian Musgrave, senior lecturer in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Adelaide, this administration method bypasses the liver, whereas dietary BPA is extensively and rapidly removed by the liver. "For most people, exposure to BPA is far below that used in these studies... and further research is needed." **RACHEL CLEMONS**

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO



Energy escape

Politicians are calling for new safeguards to prevent electricity retailers from locking customers into contracts through promos that imply long-term savings, but allow retailers to raise rates at any time.

The SA opposition Liberal Party recently announced plans to introduce a bill that would abolish exit fees for customers who want to get out of their electricity contract because the retailer went above any regulated increase.

"[If] energy generators are taking advantage of market conditions to increase electricity prices well above those expected by the energy regulator, consumers need protection," said the SA opposition energy spokesman, Mitch Williams.

The NSW government has taken a slightly different tack, saying a ban will "provide ongoing protection for small and residential electricity customers from unjustified price increases" and will be introduced in July next year.

Late last month the Victorian Labor opposition also called for a ban on exit fees. **ANDY KOLLMORGEN**

Fend off 4G bill shock

The launch of the iPhone 5 along with the development of the 4G mobile phone network means many consumers could find themselves facing bill shock from excess internet usage on their new mobile phone.

Downloading large files or watching videos is easier than ever with the 4G high-speed network, but users might find themselves going over their data limits. ACMA is advising people to stick to five rules to avoid excess data usage and bill shock.

- Monitor your use with data usage apps on the phone.
- Use secure Wi-Fi whenever you can.
- Turn off data roaming when overseas.
- Know the cost of each megabyte of excess data beyond the plan allowance.
- Use handset settings to turn off location services and download email manually, and use mobile websites such as **m.choice.com.au**.

ROS PAGE

➤ I SAY

Fully charged

My mum recently transferred some frequent flyer points to my Qantas Frequent Flyer account. Great, I thought – I can take my 18-month-old daughter on a trip to Adelaide to visit her auntie. I had just enough points to fly, as long as I booked a Jetstar flight with no baggage allowance.

I opted out of all extras until I came to the last option, to select my seat. Now, since I was flying with a very curious and active toddler, an aisle seat was mandatory. At a cost of $5, it seemed a reasonable option.

When I got to paying for my $5 seat selection, however, I saw that the price had jumped to $13.50. The reason? A credit card surcharge of $8.50.

I tried to find an alternative payment option but, without a Jetstar MasterCard, I was stuck. I even tried cancelling the seat, but there didn't seem to be a way to do this without restarting the booking process. Having already spent over an hour on the computer, I gave up and paid the surcharge.

But I didn't leave it at that. A few days later, I phoned Jetstar demanding a refund of the surcharge, which they agreed to.

From 1 January 2013, card schemes such as Visa and MasterCard can prevent retailers from levying a surcharge beyond a reasonable cost price to the retailer. But we shouldn't have to wait until then for reasonable surcharges.

We shouldn't have to wait until next year for reasonable surcharges

UTA MIHM

Spin control

Just when you thought cosmetic products couldn't get sillier, Self Care Corporation's Freezeframe Non-surgical Bust Enhancer and the Brazilian Butt Lift creams appear.

According to advertising material, Bust Enhancer is "clinically proven to increase breast appearance by up to 13% in 84 days", while the Butt Lift is supposedly "clinically proven to stimulate fat and give you curves in all the right place". And at just $79 for 120mL of the stuff, you can do it all without the hassle, expense or downtime of plastic surgery!

When we rang Self Care to ask for details of the "clinical studies" that prove the benefits touted by the products, we were told the information would be emailed to us. We're still waiting.

According to its website, the active ingredients in the bust enhancer are mangosteen extract, quince extract, "the biofermenation [sic] of a green algae called chlorella vulgaris" and "fat-enhancing peptide technology".

Cosmetic scientist and pharmacist Tina Aspres says the claims are outrageous. Unless studies supporting the claims have been published in a reputable peer-reviewed journal, they haven't been scrutinised, she says.

"While peptides can help the skin they are easily broken down by enzymes," she says. "They don't penetrate deep enough into the skin to give any of the effects claimed."

For more dodgy product claims, see our Shonky Awards story on page 16. **ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH**

Have you seen outrageous marketing claims on a product? Email us the details to ***spincontrol@choice.com.au.***

NYC junks junk food

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's impressive efforts to wage war against obesity in New York City may have taken a wrong turn recently when he embraced his country's National Donut Day the day after declaring his intention to ban supersized soft drinks at certain outlets. However, he's back on track with the announcement of the New York City Healthy Hospital Food Initiative, a voluntary program under which participating hospitals will make healthy choices readily available for staff, patients and visitors across multiple venues.

Not only will patients' meals be healthier, but hospitals will sell less junk food and improve the availability of healthy options for staff and visitors in hospital cafeterias and vending machines. **RACHEL CLEMONS**

CLARIFICATION

In our gardening special report (*CHOICE*, September 2012) we said the Victa Commando CE254 is "ideal for larger gardens" but also listed "hard to push and doesn't turn easily on grass" as a bad point. Despite its shortcomings, its lack of cord means it may still be preferable to corded electric models should your mains power supply be located far away.

IMAGE: APPLE

Lab Tours

Are you curious about how CHOICE tests hundreds of products every year? Then come along to our very last lab tour for the year in Marrickville, Sydney. To join us on Wednesday 14 November, head to choice.com.au/about-us/lab-tours or email us at labtours@choice.com.au. Numbers are limited, so book now.

Want to save on bank fees?

In July this year, banking reforms came into effect designed to make switching your bank account from one financial institution to another a whole lot easier. We're investigating how the new laws are affecting real-life experiences, so we're looking for CHOICE members who are interested in switching their bank account. If you'd like to take part, contact us at **money@choice.com.au**, tell us the name of your current bank and of the one you want to switch to, and please provide a daytime phone number.

UTA MIHM

Wi-find

Using tracking software to locate stolen gadgets is not trespass, the ACT Magistrates Court has ruled.

Earlier this year, an alleged thief tried to argue that the owner of an iPad that had been stolen could not use the Find My iPhone app to track his gadget because the GPS tracking software would have to cross over private property without permission. The prosecution argued there was no electronic trespass as the victim had a legal right to retrieve his stolen property.

Chief magistrate Lorraine Walker likened using GPS software to locate stolen goods to turning on the radio, which accesses electronic radio waves that are in the public domain. She said that if electronic trespass were validated in the present case, she could not draw the distinction between electronic trespass and innocent people merely turning on the radio, and so dismissed the electronic trespass argument.

Legal systems around the world have been attempting to legislate in this new area of law. In the US and Canada, maliciously hacking into people's private online networks has been deemed to constitute electronic trespass. Australia has yet to adopt a similar approach. **ROCHELLE JONES**

Talkback

How long did it take you to repay your home loan? If you haven't yet paid it off, when do you plan to? Share your story with us on ***talkback@choice.com.au.***

Puncturing the pain

People who receive acupuncture for pain relief end up having less pain than those who don't receive it, and traditional is slightly better than sham acupuncture. That's the finding of a recent review of acupuncture studies involving more than 17,000 patients that compared the ancient Chinese practice to standard pain care or to sham acupuncture, which is where patients have needles placed differently to traditional acupuncture. The result was similar among different sources of pain, whether it was chronic back and neck pain, osteoarthritis or headache.

KARINA BRAY

We're going green

We encourage all CHOICE members to supply us with an email address and mobile number to help us reduce the amount of paper we use in our communications. Email us at **goinggreen@choice.com.au** and we'll move you over to our electronic list. If you can't remember what details we have, email us anyway or call us on 1800 069 552 or 02 9577 3399 and we'll update your details on the spot. We need your support to help CHOICE go green.

Childcare crisis

$70
Average daily cost for one child in childcare

$18
Hourly pay of some childcare workers

180
Number of childcare workers estimated to leave the profession each week.

Union United Voice is calling on the federal government to contribute an additional $1.4bn to the childcare sector to help solve what it says is a resourcing crisis, with the recent launch of the Big Steps campaign.

Childcare is a huge cost for Australian parents. Recent research by United Voice found the average daily cost per child is more than $70 a day, with many families in urban areas paying far more. Despite childcare being so costly, educators can earn as little as $18 an hour, and it's been estimated that up to 180 of them are leaving the profession each week. Beyond the resourcing issues, this revolving door of workers can have a negative impact on the children in their care and for parents.

For more information, head to bigsteps.org.au.

KATE BROWNE

A widening gap

Australians are spending more on health expenses not covered under health insurance or Medicare than most other OECD countries. A report released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare earlier this year found our out-of-pocket expenses amounted to $1075 per person in 2010, almost double the $583 amount we spent to cover the gap in 2000. Although the rise as a proportion of household expenditure on out-of-pocket medical expenses was 2.7% to 3.2% over these 10 years, concerns have been raised about our future ability to cover specialist treatments and preventative dental care.

ELISE DALLEY

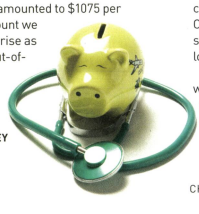


IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO

Right of refund

If you pay out your home loan within two years of taking it out and have paid lender's mortgage insurance (LMI), ask your bank to refund that insurance.

LMI is usually required if you have a deposit of less than 80% of the value of the home and can cost thousands of dollars. While you pay the premium, the contract is between your bank and the insurance company. Under certain circumstances the insurance company may pay your bank a refund of up to 40% of the premium, though your bank may have also negotiated a cheaper premium in exchange for no refund. It's a good idea to check with your bank if there is a refund as they're not required to pass it on to you.

The Commonwealth Bank charges $6703 for LMI for a $400,000 home loan for a 25-year period with a 10% deposit. However, the bank doesn't receive a refund from its LMI insurer Genworth as it has instead negotiated cheaper premiums for customers. CBA does not charge LMI if you're switching from one CBA home loan to another.

The federal government is currently working on the introduction of a mandatory fact sheet to allow consumers to compare LMI quotes.

UTA MIHM

We say, you say

Both our tester and the family of CHOICE's Rachel Clemons – Rachel, her husband Paul, and kids, Elliot (two) and Georgia (four) – took Toyota's new hybrid people-mover for a ride to see how it measures up.

The family say

"It's easy to get the kids in and out of this car, and there is a reasonable amount of room to get around the child seats. These are far enough away from locks and window controls and child seat anchors are easy to locate. With plenty of room in the first rear seat, it easily fits two child seats with space for a third passenger to be comfortable. There's enough space for the kids when you move the front seats back as far as possible.

"Boot space is disappointing unless you fold forward the rear two seats, though you can still fit a folded stroller and some bags on top. While technically a seven-seater, the space restriction means the car is not suitable for a family larger than five on longer trips.

"This car is easy to park in tight spaces. The built-in window shades are great – much better than the add-ons. One downside is the car doors are quite low to the ground, so you have to be careful opening them so they don't scrape on the kerb.

"We have mixed feelings on the height of the back seat. On the one hand the kids enjoy being high up and getting good views out the windows. On the other hand it's frustrating for the toddler who likes to be able to climb into his child seat himself but finds he can't without assistance."

CHOICE says

"I was more impressed with the Prius V than the regular Prius sedan. There is less disconnect with overall handling and cornering, presumably because it's designed to carry more weight. It managed 5.8L/100km in our test, whereas the fuel claim is 4.4L/100km. Acceleration to 100km is 12.2 seconds in normal mode, and 11.5 seconds in power, the latter a little slower than the regular Prius. Braking distance from 60 km/h is 14.9m."

The verdict

While our tester prefers the Toyota Camry Hybrid over the Prius V for a family car, our family say they'd consider this car. The fuel consumption is a big plus, as is the ease of use with kids and its manoeuvrability. **MATTHEW STEEN**

TOYOTA PRIUS V FIRST LOOK
PRICE $35,990
CONTACT toyota.com.au
★★★½☆

Viagra saves the tigers?

Could the promotion of impotence drug Viagra help the plight of endangered tigers across Asia?

While it sounds like a stretch, a 2005 report published in the journal *Environmental Conservation* by a psychologist at UNSW found middle-aged men in China had started to use Viagra in place of traditional Chinese impotence remedies, which include tiger penis, despite continuing to use other traditional remedies for other ailments.

KATE BROWNE

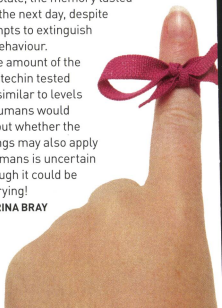
Sweet memories

Canadian researchers have turned their attention to chocolate's potential memory-enhancing properties – using pond snails.

With no easy way to establish whether the snails could memorise pi to 517 places, the experimenters trained the snails to close their breathing tubes in deoxygenated water, a feat they remembered for up to three hours. But after exposure to a flavonoid called epicatechin, which is found in dark chocolate, the memory lasted until the next day, despite attempts to extinguish the behaviour.

The amount of the epicatechin tested was similar to levels we humans would eat, but whether the findings may also apply to humans is uncertain – though it could be fun trying!

KARINA BRAY



97%

Proportion of the wild tiger population that has disappeared over the last century

3200

Number of tigers that exist in the wild today

Source: WWF

Beating the blacklist

Consumers shouldn't use costly credit repair companies to get their names removed from credit blacklists, the Energy and Water Ombudsmen in NSW and Victoria and the national Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman have warned.

Credit repair agencies charge consumers on average $1000 to have black marks removed. In many cases they use ombudsman services that consumers could have used free of charge themselves.

You can be blacklisted over debts as small as $100, which can limit your ability to get credit for five years. Consumers often only find out about the listing when their loan or phone contract application is refused.

Ombudsman services can get unfair bad credit listings removed if, for example, the telco or energy company cannot demonstrate that it has followed the correct notification procedures.

If you think you've been unfairly listed, contact the ombudsman service in your state or territory. For more, see page 38.

UTA MIHM

Game adults

A revised computer game classification structure will come into effect early next year, bringing with it an additional layer of classifiable elements. The R18+ category, unused for computer games until now, will allow the legal sale of adult games previously unavailable in Australia.

The updated classification scheme, which takes into account themes of violence, sex, language, drug use and nudity, will ideally provide a more detailed picture for parents prior to purchase. Consumers can now expect games with the R18+ rating to include nudity, drug use and violence, while depictions of detailed crime, violence and sexual violence, as well as the promotion of drug use, will remain in the Refused Classification (RC) category.

ELISE DALLEY

Levy unlevied

The NSW government is conducting a review of the Emergency Services Levy (ESL), while the Victorian government has decided to abolish its Fire Services Levy (FSL) on home insurance premiums as of July 2013. The levies fund the fire and emergency services in each state and are currently applied to home and contents insurance premiums.

It is proposed that NSW follow Victoria, Queensland, WA and SA by replacing the ESL with a property-based tax that will shift the responsibility for collecting the levy from insurance companies and the state government to local councils.

The Insurance Council of Australia says scrapping the levy will lead to significantly cheaper home and contents policies. NSW Treasurer Mike Baird says households that insure their home and contents are subsidising those that don't have insurance. "A better and fairer system would spread the costs across the whole community." But these claims seem sketchy, since 95% of NSW households have building insurance and 64% have contents insurance (according to the ABS), while a property-based tax will be levied on the 68% of those in the state who are homeowners.

JODI BIRD

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO

Your Say

We want to hear from you. If you've had a bad experience, been ripped off or scammed, tell us and help other CHOICE members avoid the same traps. If you've had a great response to a complaint you've taken to a manufacturer or retailer, our members want to know about that too! Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

Contact us!

Email us at yoursay@choice.com.au or write to Your Say, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204.

The CAA responds

The Chiropractors' Association of Australia (CAA) wishes to complain in the strongest possible terms about your story on chiropractic care, Back to the Future (*CHOICE*, August 2012).

The CAA was not consulted on the content of this story prior to publication. In the CAA's opinion, it contains many inaccuracies and publishing it was not in the public interest.

There are more than 215,000 consultations to chiropractors in Australia each week. Australian chiropractors are five-year university trained, and government-registered and regulated health professionals.

Above all, chiropractors are spinal health experts whose expertise contributes significantly to the health and general wellbeing of large numbers of Australians.

For more detailed information and education regarding chiropractic care, we would invite readers to visit chiropractors.asn.au or email us at caa@caa.asn.au.

Lawrence Tassell
National President, CAA
Penrith, NSW

Go, Harvey, go!

With reference to your story, Are You Being Served? (*CHOICE*, September 2012), it's a pity your shadow shop was carried out entirely in Sydney. Your experience with Harvey Norman is in complete contrast with mine of the franchise in Hobart.

Several years ago our TV died, and after reading a *CHOICE* article we decided on a Panasonic LCD digital TV,

Thumbs

I'm a regular user of Matisse (Derivan) acrylic paints and have had some trouble with lids splitting on tubes. I contacted Derivan and asked if they could send me some spare lids. They responded immediately, replacing a tube of paint that had oxidised, and sending me around 50 lids plus a package of paint tubes. After such a good and prompt response, I will continue to buy and recommend Matisse/Derivan artist products.

Linda Norman, Port Melbourne, Vic

We purchased a Ryco oil filter for an engine service, and found the thread was faulty and would not connect properly. We approached Ryco, which replaced the oil filter with two new ones, that were delivered by the sales rep for free.

Wayne Parlor, Adelaide, SA

which meant a new digital recorder/player as well. After a bit of shopping around, we arrived at Harvey Norman where the very helpful salesman told us to leave our purchase until the following week because the player we had in mind was going to be on special at a reduced price – which meant less commission for him, but very happy customers.

In a separate incident a few weeks ago, I was after an item in Harvey Norman's computer department. The salesman advised me that what I was trying to do wouldn't work, resulting in no sale or waste of money. That's two occasions, over some years, where the assistants had good product knowledge, were very helpful and didn't leave me waiting around for assistance.

Rod Broadby, Kaoota, Tas

CHOICE SAYS *We were keen to shadow shop in other states, but unfortunately for this particular project we were limited by budget and insurance so had to keep it in Sydney.*

We think the interesting point about all of these large retailers is the inconsistency of service. Some sales assistants are terrific, others very poor, yet they can be working for the same chain. It seems many of our larger retailers need to invest in better staff training and consistency with service so all consumers are guaranteed a great in-store experience, no matter which branch you happen to shop in.

I bought a pair of Philips headphones at Heathrow Airport in June to use on my flight back to Australia, but they proved to be faulty. Upon returning to Australia, I contacted Philips to report the problem, and its local agent, Crest Electronics, quickly replaced the faulty headphones with another set that was much better than the ones I'd bought.

Gillian Appleton, Leura, NSW

Dreadful déjà vu

LETTER OF THE MONTH

It was chilling to read your account of IUDs in *CHOICE*, September 2012. The words were exactly those used by my specialist to persuade me to use the Dalkon Shield in 1973 – that it was "a far cry" from earlier, outdated IUDs; there was a low risk of pelvic infection; there was no evidence of increased risk of subsequent infertility; it was useful for younger, childless women who had trouble with the pill; it had threads that protruded through the cervix for checking/easy removal.

Within 12 months of insertion, I had to have extensive surgery as a result of this device causing an infection. Within four years of using the device I'd had five operations, including a hysterectomy at age 27. All up, I've now had 30 operations, and must use HRT. I am unable to walk far or stand for long. I've had to have help in managing domestic chores for many years. This is not the result of an "image problem".

My experience of the medical profession, especially gynaecologists who are mostly male, is that it's very difficult for a woman to convince them that she knows when things are not right with her body, or that they are wrong. Even now, not one doctor has admitted to me that recommending this device was a mistake.

I have also learnt that manufacturers are less than forthcoming about faults in their products. The Dalkon Shield was still being actively marketed in these soothing tones in Australia some years after the company became aware that the device had a flaw in the threads.

I hope the new IUDs are in fact better than previous ones, but I urge any woman who decides to use one not to be fobbed off with antibiotics and patronising reassurances should they experience signs of infection after insertion, particularly repeated urinary tract infections. Always insist on a full examination.

Name and address supplied

HEALTH

The question of contraception

Just because you started on the pill doesn't mean you have to stay on it. Zoya Shefalovich writes

In 2010 between 47,000 to 48,000 women had the removal of the contraceptive implant, Implanon – one of the most effective methods of birth control – is now available in a new, smaller version called Nexplanon. But why...

For the periods part of it I'd always had really heavy periods, but I'd been told by doctors I'd always had heavy periods, so I just thought it was a hormone thing, and I'd always had really bad cramps.

In practice, the pill is less effective than a large number of products now available

Read how to maximise when to use them, how to consider your options and how contraceptive management in Australia ignored practice guidelines for more than a decade.

Health professionals' Planning Australia's future workforce report estimates that by 2025 there will be a shortfall of 31,000 nurses and midwives, a personal crisis in the making.

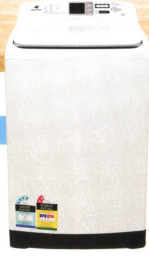
There's a lot of attention and information about what options are available to women when it comes to contraception.

"No matter how safe a medical device or procedure seems to be, things can go wrong"

CHOICE SAYS *The experts CHOICE spoke with were all very insistent that Mirena, the hormonal IUD currently in use in Australia, is a far different and improved model from those used in the past, such as the Dalkon Shield. However, regardless of this, your experience is a very important reminder to women (and to the public in general) that no matter how safe a medical device or procedure seems to be, things can go wrong, and it is important to have avenues for redress.*

AND THE WINNER IS...

As usual, there were plenty of contenders apparently lining up for the awards you'd think nobody wants. So who gets the lemon gongs this year?



THE SHONKY FOR...

Wash not, waste not goes to

Samsung SW70SP

After testing more than 170 washing machines over the past six years, the 7kg Samsung SW70SP top-loading washer takes the prize for water consumption. The Shonky prize, that is – and that's nothing to cheer about.

Using 224L of water on its auto-sensing mode to wash a 3.5kg load of clothes earned the machine a score of 0% for water efficiency. With a 4-star official water rating, the Samsung sits mid-pack among its mates, but this is calculated using a standard mode, not the auto-sensor program we tested – and we believe consumers would use. Meanwhile, the top-scoring machines overall used only one-quarter of that amount of water, while the most water-frugal machine, the 10kg LG WD14060D6 front loader, used only 37L!

We know what you're thinking: more water means a better wash, right? Wrong. In fact, at 62% its score for dirt removal is one of the lowest on test. Its rinse score, however, is another story at 99%. Yep, it ranks numero uno for rinsing, absolutely trouncing the opposition with the runner-up scoring a mere 98% with a few equal-thirds lagging way behind on 97%. All right, so it's not that much better than the rest, but a win's a win, eh Black Caviar? Meanwhile, our desert dwellers' delight, the LG, scored 78% for dirt removal and a not-too-shabby 82% for rinsing.

The good news is that Samsung can shake off its reputation as The Great Imitator – it's out on its own with this one!

THE SHONKY FOR...

Serving it up goes to

Toblerone

Picture, if you will, a gathering of 16 people, ready to tuck into their 400g bar of Toblerone, which conveniently contains 16 serves – according to the packet. But as servee number 15 takes the last pyramidal piece, a problem becomes apparent: 16 serves but only 15 pieces.

Clearly this logistical nightmare of mountainous portions can only be solved by breaking out the Swiss Army knife (which is why they were invented*), cutting one-sixteenth off every single piece and giving the resultant nougaty-chocolate crumb collection to the sweetless sixteenth. Either that, or it's all-out chocolate war.

And it's not just the 400g mountain range that suffers a number of serves versus number of mountains disjunction. The 200g range has 15 pieces and eight serves, and the 50g has 11 pieces and two serves. Yep, it's as cuckoo as a clock! But still we buy them, leaving Herr Tobler yodelling all the way to the Swiss bank.

Only the 100g mountain range can be divided in the sane, diplomatically neutral and mathematically pleasing manner of which we might imagine the Swiss would be proud, having 12 pieces and four serves. No knives, no war, no crumbs. Toblerone: it's Swiss for Shonkalicious!

* Any resemblance to actual historical fact is purely coincidental and extremely unlikely.

THE SHONKY FOR...

Woo water goes to

Nature's Way Kids Smart Natural Medicines

Shonky loves homeopathy. The idea of selling water for upwards of $1000 per litre and claiming it's medicine represents the very essence of shonkiness. But convincing anxious or desperate parents they can use it to treat their kid's ailments takes it to a whole new level.

Introducing the Nature's Way Kids Smart Natural Medicine range, with variants for cold and flu, hay fever and runny nose, pain and fever, and for calming kids down. Already feather-whipped by the TGA for making unsubstantiated claims about the efficacy of the products, Nature's Way has done nothing to temper its assertions the products might actually do something. Most of the homeopathic "ingredients" – and given the dilution factor, we use the term loosely – feature plant extracts, including strychnine and insecticidal *Sabadilla*, and arsenic. Stop. Rewind. Was that strychnine? They're giving kids *strychnine?* Sure enough, the "Nux vomica 6C" in the "Calm" liquid is the homeopathic term for strychnine, in a dilution of one in a trillion.

To picture this 6C dilution in real terms, imagine you have an Olympic-size swimming pool full of water. Now take 20 such pools, and join them all together. Put one drop of the strychnine "mother tincture" (the original liquid containing the now-discarded strychnine) in this mega pool, stir, and you have a 6C Nux vomica swimming pool. Worried? Well don't be: this is further diluted in the bottle by a further one-thousandth.

Clearly the harm doesn't come from the stuff itself – it's effectively water with blackcurrant flavour. The harm comes from doing nothing for your children in the expensive and mistaken belief you're doing something.

As public health campaigner Dr Ken Harvey points out, "symptoms such as 'restlessness, anxiety, irritability and agitation' the 'Calm' claims to treat can be the symptoms of potentially serious childhood infectious diseases for which a homeopathic remedy is entirely inappropriate. Such misguided treatment might make a parent postpone seeking more appropriate medical advice to the child's detriment. In my opinion, this sort of promotion is dangerous and an affront to public health and medical science."

THE SHONKY FOR...

Taxiing down the runaway charges goes to

Cabcharge

So you book a taxi, take the scenic route down to Shonkytown and the fare comes to $42.10, including booking fee, flagfall, applicable road tolls, night loading and GST. Unfortunately, the driver hasn't enough change for your $50 note, so rather than give him the $7.90 tip he was probably hoping for, you hand over your credit card – whereupon you're hit with an additional 10% credit card surcharge. This makes a mockery of the typical 1-3% credit card surcharge we seem to be hit with elsewhere these days.

But according to Cabcharge, the company responsible for the payment processing infrastructure (card-sticky-inny-machines) in cabs, it's actually not a "surcharge". Rather, Cabcharge says, it "applies fees on financial services rather than as a surcharge on the underlying transaction".

Uh, sorry, but if it waddles and quacks like a lame euphemism and charges like a wounded bull, then it's a 10% credit card surcharge. But the sting is at the tail end of the transaction – the GST that's charged on the surcharge for payments by non-Cabcharge cards. Fee on financial service, that is. So you're actually paying 11%.

We're not the only ones who think it's excessive, and from January 1 next year, new surcharging rules come into play courtesy of the Reserve Bank, whereby surcharges have to reflect the true cost of providing the service. Cabcharge is firmly in the sights of hunters seeking to reduce the waddling, quacking surcharge to a more reasonable level, such as the five per cent recommended in the recent taxi inquiry in Victoria.

Naturally, Cabcharge reckons it won't be affected by the new rules. Because it's not a surcharge. Quack.

THE SHONKY FOR...

Ticket to taking us for a ride goes to

Ticketek and Ticketmaster

We pay a lot to see big international acts in Australia, located as we are, to paraphrase Paul Keating, at the gluteus maximus end of the world. But it's the issue of the additional ticketing charges that's so irksome.

Take Elton John, for example, touring in November. The cheapest Ticketmaster tickets for the Sydney Entertainment Centre cost $119.90. But add the credit card surcharge of $2.64 and a "handling fee" of $9.50, and you're looking at $132.04. We guess that's why they call it the music fan blues.

But it's not just Ticketmaster – Ticketek, the other half of the Aussie ticket-sales duopoly, also add on extra charges, including a "service/delivery fee" and credit card surcharge. The cheapest Jennifer Lopez tickets at the Rod Laver Arena cost $101.60, with a service/delivery fee ranging from $5.20 to $11.10, depending on how the tickets are delivered, and a credit card surcharge of 1.75% – and no alternative method of online payment. While the service/delivery fee is the same regardless of whether you buy one or 10 tickets, you still have to pay if you print them out yourself. On your own printer. With your own ink and paper. How J Lo can they go?

Unfortunately consumers – and even the event managers themselves – have little choice other than to use the Big Two, which have wrapped up exclusive ticketing rights to many venues around the country. Competitors with better pricing and service for consumers are unable to compete without being impeded, and the ACCC's action against Ticketek last year, which saw them charged with anti-competitive behaviour and fined $2.5m, appears to have had little trickle-down effect in terms of benefits for consumers and probably didn't put much of a dent in their reported $50m profit that year.

THE SHONKY FOR...

More like a squabble than a killing goes to

Exit Mould and Coles Ultra Mould Remover

When CHOICE investigated bathroom mould killers this year, we were astonished to learn that they don't actually, well, kill mould.

Mycologists – that's fungus boffins to you and me – tell us there are several reasons for this, first and foremost being that these alleged mould killers can't penetrate porous surfaces, such as grout, which is where mould tends to party. Yes, it may look nice and white post-spray, courtesy of the bleach removing the colour, and some of the surface mould may even have rubbed off, but the root structure remains entrenched in the grout ready to sprout again and party another day. But it gets worse: the bleach can actually erode and corrode grout and tiles, making them more porous – and more receptive to future mould festivities.

And did you know that the active ingredient actually deteriorates over time? While this is kind of disclosed on the packaging, the starting levels are so low anyway that after a while there's not much left but the reassuring fragrance of chlorine.

So when market leader Exit Mould, along with Coles Ultra Mould Remover (using uncannily similar wording), tells us the product "kills ingrained mould" and "penetrates porous surfaces to attack mould at the source", we're not convinced.

THE SHONKY FOR...

Sending consumer rights packing goes to

Jetset Travelworld

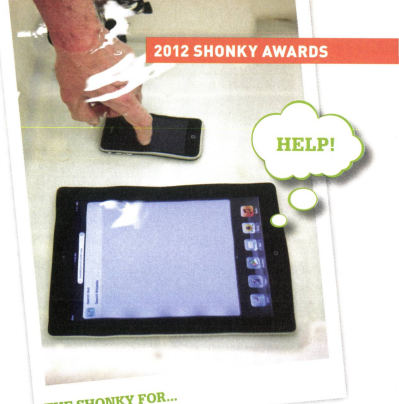
Having saved many long years for your dream Aral Sea cruise, and realising it's now or never and you've saved a grand total of nothing, you pay for it on credit card. And there's a bonus: if something goes wrong – such as the cruise company going belly-up along with the Aral Sea itself – you can use chargeback to get your money back.

Chargeback means that if goods or services you've paid for on credit aren't provided, you can apply to your credit card company to get your money back, and they in turn will get the money back from the people you paid. Chargeback rights are vital when it comes to travel, particularly international travel where insolvency isn't often covered by travel insurance.

This is why our shonky radar bleeped into overdrive when we discovered, buried in its terms and conditions, that Jetset and other members of the Jetset Travelworld group (Travelworld, Harvey World Travel and Best Flights) require you to waive your chargeback rights in its booking terms and conditions.

These travel agents are shirking their duty to take responsibility for the actions or conditions of merchants with whom they do business and have a commercial relationship. Consumers shouldn't have to bear the risk of non-delivery of services effectively recommended by the agent, leaving them to work out any dispute directly with the merchant. If your grasp of Uzbek is shaky at the best of times, it will be even worse at 3am on a dodgy phone line when you're trying to negotiate a refund.

What Jetset Travelworld is doing isn't illegal, but we reckon asking consumers to waive this vital consumer protection is unethical and dodgy, and a fine example of shonkosity.



THE SHONKY FOR...

Don't try this at home, folks goes to

Liquipel

Liquipel is a nanotechnology coating for phones and other mobile devices that claims it "can make your phone water-safe, supporting a long and receptive life". It does this by applying "an invisible coating to the inside and outside of your electronic device, giving you optimal protection against damage from accidental contact with water". With the gauntlet thus thrown down, we duly sent off some iGadgets for Liquipelling.

Test time. First we conducted a test inspired by the Liquipel promotional video, which showed them generously dousing an iPhone with water, and leaving it fully submerged – contrary, it should be pointed out, to their disclaimers that say you shouldn't do this. Their phone suffered no apparent ill effect. Unfortunately, our iPhone and iPad did, almost immediately. So it's pretty much a case of do as I say, not as I do – not to mention misleading advertising.

Our second round of less vigorous testing, including a shower, a brief dunking and finally submersion, found that two Liquipelled phones fared no better than two untreated control phones, with one of the untreated phones surviving unharmed. The Liquipel claims, unlike the Liquipelled phones, don't hold water, making the $99 service a false reassurance and a complete waste of money.

Meanwhile, four of the five test iPhones went to a watery grave. Speaking at their funeral, a distraught Steve Duncombe, our head tech-head, stated grimly: "We did not expect them to die. We looked at Liquipel's video, we read their press release, and we believed them." Liquipel: it's homeopathy for iStuff. ■

Feeding time

Many of us love our pets, so what should we be feeding them to ensure a long and healthy life? **Kate Browne** investigates

For many Australians, our pets are part of the family. At last count, 63% of Aussie households own a pet, with more than half owning either a cat or dog. And within the next five years, spending on our pets will exceed $5.39 billion.

And when it comes to filling our pets' bellies we're similarly enthusiastic. A national survey published in 2010 revealed we spend more than $1.8bn annually on feeding our pets. Indeed, a quick tour of pet stores and supermarkets reveals a wide selection of pet food options, from tinned wet foods to dry kibble, biscuits and fresh pet meat.

Add to that an array of products claiming to be suited especially for kittens and puppies or the senior citizens of the pet world, and consumers are bombarded with choice. But which food option is right for your best friend?

IMAGE: ISTOCK PHOTO

Give a dog a bone?

Earlier this year at the Sydney Pet and Animal Expo, Dr Alex Chaves, an animal nutritionist at the University of Sydney, surveyed dog owners to find out what they feed their dogs and why.

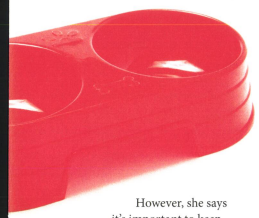
Out of the 280 people surveyed, 93% were found to buy commercial dog food, while seven per cent make their own pet food. Most people (67%) only give their dogs dry food, just under a third feed them a mix of dry and wet food, and four per cent of people used wet food only. The three most popular factors behind choosing a dog-food brand were cost, brand and the amount of vitamins and minerals in the diet.

"Go for a high-quality commercial diet as a baseline, then you can add other elements to the diet as your pet likes"

We asked our CHOICE Facebook fans what they like to feed their cats and dogs and received 110 responses. The majority prefer commercially prepared pet food, with others using a mix of prepared and fresh meats, and some choosing to make their own food.

Dishing it out

Dr Jade Norris, scientific officer and veterinarian at RSPCA Australia, says the RSPCA provides detailed feeding guidelines for cats and dogs (more information can be found at **choice.com.au/petfood**).



However, she says it's important to keep things simple.

"We recommend you go for a high-quality commercial diet as a baseline that's appropriate for their age and health and that's compliant with Australian standards, then you can add other elements to the diet as your pet likes, including raw, meaty bones occasionally."

Dr David Neck, a veterinarian and small animals spokesperson for the Australian Veterinarian Association (AVA)*, says your vet is the best place to start when it comes to feeding advice for your pet.

"Different pets have different nutritional requirements," he says. Ideally, every pet owner needs to have a relationship with their vet and that includes being given advice on nutrition." ▸

$1.8bn

The amount Australians spent feeding their pets in 2010

*"BOTH THE RSPCA AND AVA HAVE COMMERCIAL ARRANGEMENTS WITH PET FOOD COMPANY HILLS THE AVA SAYS THAT THIS ARRANGEMENT IS TO FUND AN EDUCATION PROGRAM ONLY AND DOES NOT AFFECT THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF INDIVIDUAL VETS.

Fresh is not best

Fresh pet meat is found in the refrigerated section of supermarkets and some pet food stores. It comes in the form of meat, "steaks" and rolls. And while these may seem a wholesome alternative to the tinned and packaged stuff, the experts CHOICE spoke to have concerns about these products.

Vet Dr David Neck says "pet meat does not equal pet food", adding that these products don't provide adequate nutrition for cats and dogs. While animals in the wild eat fresh meat, they also eat the whole animal, including bones, hide and internal organs.

We contacted a number of fresh pet meat manufacturers to find out whether they use sulphites in their products. If they did, we asked if they test for adequate thiamine as per the American Association of Feed Control Officials thiamine guidelines to ensure adequate thiamine throughout the shelf-life of their products. We received a mixed bag of responses.

VIP Petfoods, which also makes pet foods under the brand names Paws Fresh, Platinum and Prota, said that although some of its fresh pet meat range does include sulphites, it conducts regular testing to ensure the adequate levels of thiamine are met. Country Cuisine Pet food confirmed it does not use any preservatives or source meat that has been treated with preservatives. Paringa Pet Foods produces a range of preservative-free and fresh foods, but says it tests to ensure it is exceeding the guidelines.

Woolworths and Coles also produce fresh pet food under their private labels. However, despite contacting each supermarket several times we did not receive a response.

Last year, Queensland newspaper *The Courier-Mail* bought a selection of fresh pet meat brands from supermarkets and had them independently tested for sulphites. Despite claims from manufacturers about the levels in their particular products, the testing revealed many had far higher levels than were claimed. One product was found to have 435 times the sulphur dioxide levels than what was claimed on the packet.

Our experts suggest feeding your pets human-grade meats instead of fresh pet meat (in conjunction with a complete and balanced diet) to avoid this risk entirely.

These products do not provide the adequate nutrition required by cats and dogs

Of greater concern is that the use of sulphites as preservatives in fresh pet meat and pet rolls aren't covered in the new standard for pet food (see page 22). According to the RSPCA, there are safety issues relating to sulphur dioxide and sodium and potassium sulphite preservatives – which can cause thiamine deficiency.

"Thiamine (vitamin B1) deficiency can occur when dogs and cats are fed on a diet containing sulphite preservatives," RSPCA vet Dr Jade Norris says ."It causes severe neurological symptoms and can be fatal. For decades, sulphite preservative-induced thiamine deficiency has been frequently recognised by the Australian veterinary profession."

Norris goes on to say that thiamine deficiency can also occur when foods containing sulphur dioxide are fed in conjunction with foods that don't, because "the sulphur dioxide in one food can destroy any thiamine present in the other food being fed at the same time".

Setting the standard

Until last year there was no Australian standard for any type of pet food. However, a voluntary standard for processed tinned and dried pet food, AS 5812-2011 – Manufacturing and marketing of pet food, has since been released. It specifies requirements for the production and supply of manufactured food for dogs and cats, but not unprocessed pet meat.

This standard covers production of pet food from sourcing and receipt of ingredients to storage, processing (including heat treatment), packing, labelling and storage of products in order to assure its safety for pets. It also includes instructions for the uniform application of information provided on labels.

The complete package

As a pet owner shopping for pet food, what should you be looking for among all the cute puppies and kittens on the tins, packs and boxes?

Norris and Neck recommend pet owners choose products that are advertised as "complete and balanced". This means the pet food is formulated to contain all the nutrients required by a dog or cat, in the appropriate quantities and proportions to maintain good health.

Chaves says that when he conducted his survey of dog owners, he also asked if the labelling provided enough information on nutrition. He found 71% of people at the pet show either strongly agreed, agreed or slightly agreed with the statement: "I want more detailed nutritional values printed on pet feed packaging."

Chaves believes the pet food labelling isn't clear enough for consumers to get the information they require. "It should be the same as the labelling for human food – why is there a difference?" ■

'Complete and balanced' refers to a pet food that's formulated to contain all the required nutrients in the appropriate quantities and proportions

Vegan pets?

All the experts we spoke to expressed their concern about a small but growing trend of pet owners putting their pets on a vegetarian or vegan diet. None of them believe this is a suitable diet for cats or dogs, as cats are true carnivores and dogs are largely carnivores that are sometimes omnivores. "You can't put your beliefs onto an animal that is not suited to that diet," says Neck. "If you want a vegan pet, get a rabbit or a guinea pig."

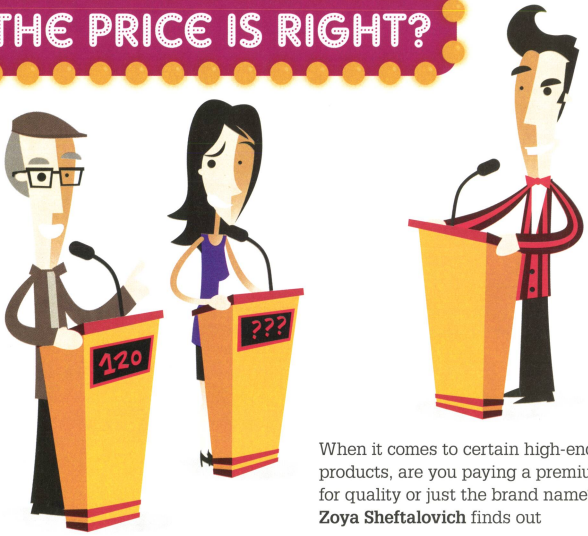
For more detailed information on the RSPCA-approved feeding guidelines, head to **choice.com.au/petfood**

Special food for special pets?

There's plenty of market segmentation in the pet food arena, with commercial foods available for kittens and puppies as well our more senior furry friends. The experts we spoke to say this is a good thing – sometimes.

"In dietary terms, animals go through three life stages," says Neck. "The first is growth: kittens and puppies have extra nutrient needs and special food is recommended. The second is when a mother is nursing: special foods are recommended for a lactating dog or cat. The third stage is simply adulthood: animals need to maintain their 'complete and balanced' nutrient intake. In most cases, older pets usually don't need special foods."

THE PRICE IS RIGHT?



When it comes to certain high-end products, are you paying a premium for quality or just the brand name? **Zoya Sheftalovich** finds out

For years, CHOICE has been proving wrong the adage that you necessarily get what you pay for. Whether it's olive oils, shampoos or even some kitchen appliances, we've found that a high price tag is no guarantee of quality.

In our latest investigation, we spoke with experts to get their insights into three different product categories: facial moisturisers, hair dryers and men's underpants. Then we pitted a cheap, easily available basic product, an exclusive, expensive product with interesting claims and a mid-priced product with similar claims against each other in a user trial. See right for how we trialled these products.

How we trialled

MOISTURISERS

We gave five women of varying ages three unlabelled samples of moisturiser. Each woman tried each moisturiser for three consecutive days, applying morning and night, and then rated them.

HAIR DRYERS

We gave five women with different hair types three hair dryers, the brand names of which were obscured. The women then used each dryer once each instead of their usual dryer. They rated the dryers on criteria including ease of use and hair condition after use.

MEN'S UNDERWEAR

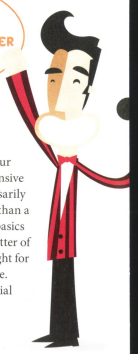
We gave five men of differing sizes three pairs of underpants each. Where possible, brand names were removed or obscured. Each pair was worn three times, and washed between wears. Our testers then rated the underwear on look and comfort.

SCORING

In our results, where a triallist gave a product an overall score of four or less out of 10, this is represented as a thumbs down, five as a sideways thumb, and six or more as a thumbs up.

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO

SKIN-DEEP PROMISES



Facial moisturisers generally contain three common ingredients: an emollient, which makes skin smooth and supple; humectants, which draw moisture into the skin; and occlusive agents, which act as a barrier and maintain moisture within the skin.

However, despite their similarities, moisturisers vary widely. From supermarket cheapies to department store splash-outs, the range available is mind-boggling. But a good moisturiser doesn't necessarily need to cost a fortune.

"Would you believe the best moisturiser is actually petrolatum – petroleum jelly or Vaseline?" says cosmetic scientist and pharmacist Tina Aspres. "However, using this alone understandably does not [feel good on the skin], so modifications are made to formulations to incorporate a range of ingredients to improve skin feel, tackiness and greasiness to suit the use that it is proposed for."

As we discovered in our blind user trial, an expensive moisturiser won't necessarily feel better on your skin than a cheapie. As long as the basics are there, it's really a matter of finding one that feels right for your particular skin type. As you'll see, our user trial produced mixed results.

Olay Moisturising Lotion

$6.75 for 75mL ($9 per 100mL); sold in supermarkets

Aspres says the Olay is a solid moisturiser that contains all the basics. Although it was the cheapest moisturiser in our user test, it delivered average results for most of our triallists overall, unlike Crème de la Mer, despite being almost one hundredth of its price. All our triallists described the texture of the moisturiser as thin. The fragrance was generally described as floral and sweet, though one triallist found it medicinal. Two chose this as their favourite of the three, though one of them still only rated it as average.

OVERALL

WHAT THEY SAID

"My skin didn't feel nice after using it. It came across as a cheap brand."
"Nice feel, but a little bit oily by the evening."

Dr LeWinn's Private Formula Oil Free Day & Night Cream

$64.95 for 56g ($115.98 per 100g); drlewinns.com.au

Dr LeWinn's claims to have been formulated by a plastic surgeon and promises to "push the boundaries in anti-ageing skincare". While four of our triallists reported no impact at all on the appearance of fine lines, they did only try the cream for three days. The cream was OK as an overall moisturiser. Most triallists found the fragrance of this moisturiser to be strong, and three found it unpleasant. Two chose this as their favourite.

OVERALL

WHAT THEY SAID

"The fragrance was too fruity for my liking – too banana-ish."
"My skin felt soft and moisturised all day. I would definitely buy this!"

Crème de la Mer

$250 for 30mL ($833.33 per 100mL); cremedelamer.com.au

Crème de la Mer was originally invented by a NASA scientist horribly disfigured in an accident to heal his burned skin. One triallist found it oily, while four described the texture as thick. Only one rated this product as their favourite.

Aspres says Crème de la Mer is "nothing extraordinary. There's no evidence that kelp [its 'special' ingredient] is anti-ageing or able to heal burns."

OVERALL

WHAT THEY SAID

"While my skin did feel softer, I didn't like the feel of the moisturiser as I applied it."
"This moisturiser made the oily parts of my face more oily, but was good on the dry parts."

ALL DRIED UP

Hair dryers fall into two categories – those marketed as simple consumer products with few bells and whistles, and those marketed as professional products, which command a premium price. Should you fork out the big bucks, or will your discount department store basic do the trick?

One of the main differences between bargain-basement and pricey hair dryers is the technology they claim to use, namely ionic and ceramic technology. Tracey Hughes, creative director of Mieka Hairdressing and Hairexpo Award's Educator of the Year 2012, says ionic hairdryers claim to cut the drying process time in half and to increase the finished shine factor.

"The ionic feature is based upon positive and negative charges," she says. Ceramic technology, on the other hand, "uses a ceramic heating unit that provides better heat regulation. Ceramic dryers can be a little more popular due to the costs being slightly [lower than] ionic dryers".

In our trial of hair dryers, the GHD Air, which claims to use ionic technology, dried hair quickest (tying in one case with the cheapest hair dryer on trial). However, while one triallist found the GHD dried her hair in less than half the time of the non-ionic cheapie, the others reported the GHD dried their hair only slightly faster.

IMAGE ISTOCKPHOTO

Remington Professional Aero 1800

$19; call 1800 623 118 (Power: 1800W)

While the Remington was the cheapest hair dryer, three triallists preferred it to the more expensive Vidal Sassoon.

However, two of our triallists said it made their hair feel dry, rough and tangled, and a third said her hair looked frizzy after use.

OVERALL

WHAT THEY SAID

"It was OK for what I assume is a low-end hair dryer. It is much better than the [Vidal Sassoon] I tested first. My hair looks OK, but it is still very inferior to my own hair dryer." "It is very ineffective. It is similar to the dryers you find at hotels."

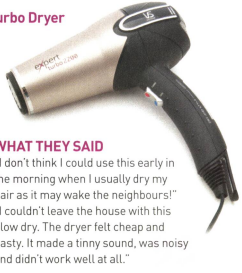
Vidal Sassoon Studio Tools Expert Turbo Dryer

$45; call 1800 650 263 (Power: 2200W)

This mid-range dryer performed surprisingly poorly in our user trial. Three testers rated it as the worst performer of the lot.

"To be honest I could not give an explanation as to why [it did so badly]," says Hughes. "Since it does contain the newer technology, I can't offer a technical reason as to why the performance was poorer."

OVERALL



WHAT THEY SAID

"I don't think I could use this early in the morning when I usually dry my hair as it may wake the neighbours!" "I couldn't leave the house with this blow dry. The dryer felt cheap and nasty. It made a tinny sound, was noisy and didn't work well at all."

GHD Air

$199; ghdhair.com/au (Power: 2100W)

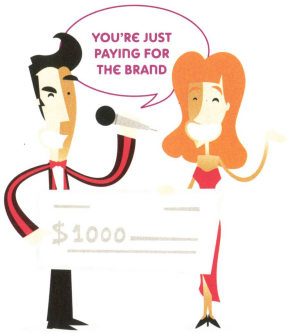
The GHD Air easily surpassed the other dryers in our survey when triallists were asked to give it an overall rating. They all said they would buy the dryer, and were willing to pay top dollar for it. However, although the performance in our survey was impressive, Lili Hopkins, freelance hair stylist and salon owner, believes there are better products out there in the same price category, her pick being a Parlux.

OVERALL

WHAT THEY SAID

"It was pretty fast considering how thick my hair is, and my hair didn't feel frizzy after drying." "It was hard to tell which setting it was on, as it looks like it's on the highest when it's actually on medium. But I like the rubber stoppers on the side so when you put it down it lands gently every time."

WHAT LIES BENEATH



Men's underpants run the price gamut, ranging from less than $5 all the way to $100. Some even claim to be spun with distilled water from the Italian Alps.

Men's underwear designer with Diamond Cut International, Kaitlin Romei, says cheap underwear may not necessarily be a great buy.

"With a very cheap pair, you're likely to lose features including stitches per inch, and compromise on the quality of the fabric and elastic, and the fit." But spending up big isn't necessary either. "Once you get to the higher end of the market, it's more of a fashion thing. You're just paying for the brand." ■

Alpha Hipster Trunk

$15 for three; available in Kmart stores

Favoured by two triallists and coming in second-best for the rest, they all generally found the Alpha's waistband, seams and leg holes comfortable and the fabric good. The pouch provided good support for all but one tester.

OVERALL

WHAT THEY SAID

"At first glance, these undies seem OK. However, an imperfect fit and my concerns about their durability means I could not recommend them."

"They held their shape the best of the undies."

Bonds Hipster Trunk

$18; bonds.com.au

Overall, the Bonds were the favourite undies of three of our gentlemen. But two were less impressed – one described the fabric as cheap-feeling and the other as too thin.

OVERALL

WHAT THEY SAID

"The support is very good, especially during sport. Movement is unrestricted while ensuring certain parts are kept out of harm's way"

"The most comfortable overall fit. The waistband is very comfortable, although I would like it a bit thicker."

Miroslav Boxer Brief

$59.95; miroslav.com

The Miroslav undies claim to use "Japanese cotton for superior comfort and sperm count". But Romei says Japanese cotton varies in quality and is no guarantee of superiority. Fertility experts said they were not aware of studies supporting the claims.

Only one triallist said the Miroslavs were his favourite in our user trial. Four complained the undies were too tight (unsurprising, since they were much smaller than equivalent sizes in the other brands), and three complained of a particularly uncomfortable care label.

OVERALL

WHAT THEY SAID

"The stitching for the label felt like fishing wire and scratched my lower back. Although they were the same size as the other pairs, these seemed smaller"

"The pouch is very small with very little give in the fabric. It was constricting and extremely uncomfortable, verging on painful, to sleep or play sport in."

In the wash

The undies were all affected differently after three washes. While the Miroslavs held their shape, the Bonds and Alphas shrank significantly despite our triallists following manufacturer's washing instructions.

And while the Alphas and Miroslavs held up well after being put into the dryer on a cool, gentle cycle, the Bonds shrank and dramatically darkened in colour (see right). This was against manufacturer's instructions, but we don't think it's unreasonable to expect a pair of men's undies to survive a turn in the tumble dryer.

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO

Wake up call

Caffeine shows up in everything from ice-cream to painkillers and weight-loss products. **Rachel Clemons** outlines some unexpected traps to avoid

Caffeine is a paradox. On one hand it offers a number of benefits: coffee consumption has been linked to a lower risk of developing type 2 diabetes, Parkinson's disease and gallstones. Caffeine can boost metabolism, making it a popular ingredient in weight-loss supplements, and has been shown to enhance exercise capacity and improve endurance exercise performance. The stimulant can also improve alertness and cognitive performance.

But too much caffeine can increase anxiety, make you restless, give you headaches and impair your sleep. Caffeine consumption can cause temporary increases in blood pressure and so has been linked to heart disease. Heavy consumption has also been implicated in pregnancy and birthing complications. And excessive caffeine intake can affect the amount of calcium that our body absorbs, so it's sometimes cited as a risk factor for osteoporosis.

Where caffeine lurks

Caffeine comes from the leaves, beans and nuts of various plants including coffee, tea, cocoa, kola and guarana – all of which can end up in the food, drinks, medications and supplements we regularly consume. While you'd expect there to be caffeine in coffee, you might be surprised by the presence – and quantity – of caffeine in products such as ice-cream, iced tea, weight-loss tablets and sports supplements (see page 28).

The problem is that it's not easy to know how much caffeine you're getting. The presence of caffeine in some foods and drinks is regulated to an extent. But aside from the following exceptions, food and drink manufacturers don't have to disclose the amount in a product, or in many cases even its presence.

- Australian food standards limit the caffeine in formulated

Sales of energy drinks in Australia and New Zealand

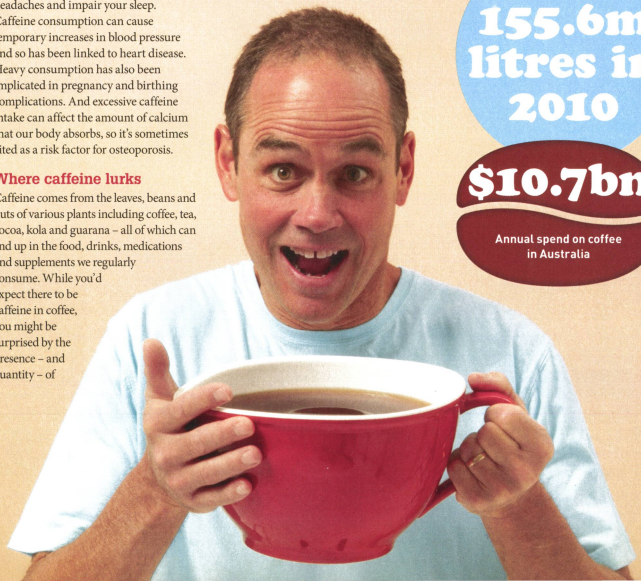
34.5m litres in 2001

vs

155.6m litres in 2010

$10.7bn

Annual spend on coffee in Australia



What's the source?

These examples show the amounts of caffeine in different foods, drinks and other caffeine-containing products.

250mL cup of black coffee, instant (78mg caffeine) (A)

Long black (250mL cup) (A)

= 253mg

Cappuccino (250mL cup) (A)

= 160mg

V (500mL can)

= 155mg

Oak Iced Coffee (600ml carton)

= 138mg

Panadol Extra (2 tablets)

= 130mg

Nature's Way Slimright Metabolift Fat Burner (2 tablets)

= 127mg

Pepsi Max (600mL bottle)

= 116mg

Ben & Jerry's Coffee Coffee Buzz Buzz Buzz! (1 scoop, 88g)

= 93mg

Mountain Dew Energised (600mL bottle)

= 90mg

PowerBar Gel, green apple flavour (pouch, 41g)

= 50mg

Lipton Ice Tea, all flavours (500mL bottle)

= 30mg

caffeinated beverages (otherwise known as energy drinks) to 320mg/L and the caffeine content must be stated on the label.

- Similarly, kola-type (cola) beverages must also declare the presence of caffeine, but while the total caffeine content mustn't exceed 145mg/L the concentration doesn't have to be specified on the label.
- Foods and beverages that contain guarana or its extract must be labelled as containing caffeine, although the exact source of the caffeine doesn't have to be specified or quantified.
- And where caffeine itself is added to a food it must be declared on the ingredients list (although the caffeine content doesn't have to be quantified).

Natural sources of caffeine, such as coffee, tea and cocoa – or products that contain these as ingredients – aren't required to label the presence of caffeine nor how much they contain.

CHOICE looked at the packaging of a range of energy and cola drinks, over-the-counter medications and weight-loss and sports supplements, and found all were labelled appropriately. Where the caffeine content information wasn't on the label, the manufacturers were generally happy to supply it when we asked, but for the most part this information wasn't available on company websites.

* We've provided the caffeine content for the individual pack size closest to 500mL for all branded drinks, as this size (or similar) was most consistently available across all mentioned products and, in most cases, is intended for individual consumption. Many of these products are also available in smaller pack sizes. **(A)** Caffeine for this generic item was derived from a composite of retail samples meeting this product description (source: NUTTAB 2010). The caffeine content of hot tea and coffee beverages can vary widely, depending on the brand and how it's prepared, and the size of the cup or mug.

Watch your intake if...

For most healthy adults, a moderate intake (the definition of which varies from source to source, but 300-400mg is commonly cited) of caffeine won't pose any problems. However, limiting or ending your caffeine intake may be warranted if:

- **You're pregnant** Studies showing a relationship between caffeine intake in pregnant women and its effects on the foetus including reduced birth weight, pre-term birth or stillbirth have resulted in the recommendation that pregnant women limit their daily consumption to 200mg per day.
- **You're young** Caffeine increases anxiety levels in children at doses of 95mg and can disrupt sleep patterns, and what is a moderate to high dose of caffeine for children and adolescents (100-400mg) can see them become increasingly nervous, jittery, and fidgety. Energy drinks have been a particular source of public concern because of their high caffeine content combined with their edgy marketing that has obvious teen appeal. Some products, including V Double Hit, Wicked, Monster Energy and Mother, contain as much caffeine in a single 500mL can as two cups of instant coffee, a level that can cause unwelcome side effects in this age group.
- **You're taking certain medications or supplements** Some medications and herbal supplements may interact with caffeine. The stimulatory effects of caffeine may increase when taking the antibiotic ciprofloxacin, for example. And the combination of caffeine and fellow stimulant bitter orange, found in a number of weight-loss and sports supplements, can increase your blood pressure.
- **You're a heavy caffeine consumer** Heavy daily caffeine intake – more than 600mg a day – can lead to some unpleasant effects including insomnia, nervousness, restlessness, irritability, stomach upset, fast heartbeat and muscle tremors. People with a 10-cup-a-day coffee habit undoubtedly fall into this category. But you may be unwittingly consuming this amount of caffeine from as little as two coffees, depending on how and where the coffee is made (see right), so bear this in mind when you're ordering another brew.
- **You're sleep-deprived** Caffeine can interfere with much-needed sleep by making it harder to nod off and shortening the time you do sleep. If you then drink caffeinated beverages during the day because you have trouble staying awake it can create a cycle of poor sleep.
- **Even a little makes you jittery** Some people are more sensitive to caffeine than others. If you're susceptible to the effects of caffeine, just small amounts – even one cup of coffee or tea – may prompt unwanted effects, such as restlessness and sleep problems. People who don't regularly drink caffeine tend to be more sensitive to its negative effects. Other factors that can determine how you react to caffeine include body mass, age, medication use and health conditions, such as anxiety disorders.

SHOT TO THE SYSTEM

Australians love coffee. More than one billion cups of the stuff are consumed in cafes, restaurants and other outlets each year – an increase of 65% over the past 10 years. If you're buying your preferred brew from coffee chains and cafes and trying to monitor your daily intake, it's worth noting that a study conducted by the University of Glasgow found caffeine levels in a single espresso range from 51mg to a whopping 322mg across 20 different coffee chains and cafes.

CHOICE verdict

It's a good idea to keep track of how much caffeine you're consuming, especially if you need to limit your intake, but reading the labels won't always give you the full picture. At the very least, we want all caffeine-containing product makers – from soft drink manufacturers to coffee chains – to provide caffeine content information on their websites. And, where it's not mandatory, we think producers should consider voluntarily labelling the presence of caffeine on their product packaging. ■

Caffeine myth-busting

- **Caffeine causes dehydration.** It acts as a mild diuretic, but the fluid you consume in most caffeinated beverages tends to offset the effects of fluid loss when you urinate.
- **Caffeine is addictive.** Regular consumption does cause mild physical dependence, and if you suddenly stop taking caffeine you may have withdrawal symptoms – including headache, fatigue and irritability – for a day or more. But caffeine dependence isn't generally considered a serious addiction.
- **Caffeine helps you sober up.** You might think you're OK to get behind the wheel if you've had a coffee after a few alcoholic bevvies, but your reaction time and judgement will still be impaired.

What's in a name?

"Pure", "natural" and "healthy" or artificial and laden with salt, sugar and saturated fat? **Elise Dalley** uncovers a fine line between healthy and hoodwinked

For many shoppers, anything that promises to be nutritious is far more likely to find its way into your shopping trolley than something that's not. Sure enough, supermarkets adorn their shelves with "healthy", "fresh" and "natural" items. On the surface, these types of product may appear to be the next best thing to visiting the farm gate or growing your own organically. But beyond the packaging, the story is often very different.

CHOICE looked at more than 200 products whose brand names imply naturalness or healthiness, and found the ingredients in many of them don't live up to the promise. Although the Australian Consumer Law and Food Standards Code aim to protect shoppers against misleading advertising, many of these brands rely on trademarks – commonly used to protect intellectual property rights and distinguish specific products from others in the marketplace – to push

Did you know?

Nutrition claim refers to the content or quality of a food, such as "source of calcium". **Health claim** refers to a relationship between a food and health, such as "rich in calcium for strong bones".

1278

The number of packaged foods with the word "natural" attached to their brand name or packaging*

unsubstantiated nutrition and health implications. Should a product be allowed to be sold as "natural" when it includes preservatives, or be marketed as "healthy" when it has lots of added sugar?

A tricky trade

Professor Bruce Neal from The George Institute for Global Health believes the practice of implying health benefits in trademarks is problematic. "The level of information provided makes it almost impossible for consumers to determine whether something is healthy or not," he says. "If companies want to put claims about the healthiness of their food on packaging, I'm very strongly of the view they should be required to have upfront evidence that justifies those claims."

From ready meals – marketed to time-poor shoppers as a healthy alternative to fast food – to breakfast cereals, "healthy" snack bars, chips and products marketed to children, trademarks with potentially deceptive claims are rife.

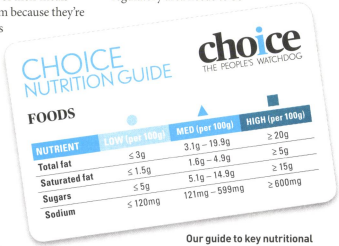
"The main problem we have here is that the food industry is primarily about shareholder value, not about providing a nutritious breakfast, lunch or dinner," Neal says. "As long as this is the case, these opportunities will be used to maximise money, and health won't really get a look in."

Neal is concerned that consumers can get what he describes as "enormous quantities" of salt, saturated fat and sugar from foods you wouldn't think were necessarily high in these unhelpful nutrients. The primary source of sodium in the Australian diet, for example, is from salt added to manufactured foods.

Take Weight Watchers' frozen ready meals as one example of a salty trap. The Australian Nutrient Reference Values set the adequate daily intake of sodium at 920mg, yet the average sodium content of its meals comes in at 892mg, with some options clocking up more than 1000mg. When CHOICE approached Weight Watchers about this, they told us the sodium content of their meals should not be a problem because they're spruiked to weight-loss members as an "occasional choice" rather than a healthy, everyday option. However, consumers who aren't members but who can purchase these meals in a supermarket are not necessarily armed with this advice.

Recommendations of the *Labelling Logic* report, commissioned by the Forum on Food Regulation in early 2011, called for regulation of the use of words that suggest health implications and closer scrutiny by authorities of trademarks that infer health implications that would otherwise be prohibited under the Food Standards Code. While indicating support for both these recommendations, the federal government has also recognised a need to investigate trademark law further, aiming to improve relationships between food and trademark regulators to ensure problematic trademarks are stamped out (see page 32).

Melanie McGrice, dietitian and owner of Health Kick Nutrition, says the grey regulatory area needs to be tightened to eliminate some "sneaky" behaviour.



Our guide to key nutritional information

Naughty by nature

Connotations of "natural" are attached to many products – from All Natural to Be Natural, Go Natural to Nice & Natural – by virtue of their trademarked brand names. According to The George▸

Ingredients
Roasted High Oleic Peanuts 49%, Yoghurt Flavoured Compound (14%), Sugar, Vegetable Fat (Emulsifier 492), Whey Powder, Yoghurt Powder (7.3%), Milk Solids, Cultures, Emulsifier (Soy Lecithin), Milk Fat, Dried Fruit Sultanas (11%), Raisins, Glucose Syrup (from Maize), Brown Sugar, Seeds (1.3%) Sesame, Sunflower, Whole Wheat, Vegetable Oil, Emulsifier Soy Lecithin)
Contains Wheat, Peanuts, Milk, Soy and Sesame Seeds.
Nutrition Information
Servings per pack 6
Average serving size 32g (1 bar)
Avg. Quantity per serving
Avg. Quantity per 100g
Energy 678kJ 2120kJ
Protein 1.2g 3.8g
Fat, total 9.6g 30.7g
– saturated 2.5g 7.7g
Carbohydrate, total 12.4g 39.2g
– sugars 8.9g 27.9g
Dietary fibre 1.7g 5.3g
Sodium 13mg 41mg
All specified values are averages.
no artificial colours or flavours, because we've...
nice& natural
natural
NUT BAR
yoghurt
6 bars 192g net

*SOURCE: THE GEORGE INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL HEALTH

Institute, its database has close to 1300 products and brands that use the word "natural" in their product name or package marketing – but the ingredients may not necessarily reflect this. For example, some contain additives such as preservatives, and although others may be technically "natural", they can also be laden with sodium and saturated fats.

Nutritional data from The George Institute on five of the All Natural Bakery Bars indicate they're all high in saturated fats and sugars. The Natural Cordial Company's lime cordial contains a sulphite preservative, while Nice & Natural Nut and Yoghurt Muesli Bars contain a "yoghurt-flavoured compound" and the popular soy-based emulsifier lecithin.

While the newly trademarked Natural Chip Company's sea salt chips are free of chemical additives, the honey soy chicken flavour contains a number of processed ingredients, such as maltodextrin and the colour caramel 1. And both chip flavours are high in saturated fat as they're cooked in palm oil, but the label lists this as "vegetable oil" (see **choice.com.au/palmoil** for more on this labelling loophole).

Contains a sulphite preservative

LIME FLAVOURED CORDIAL
INGREDIENTS: PURIFIED WATER , RECONSTITUTED FRUIT JUICES (APPLE 95%) , (LIME 5%) , NATURAL ERYTHRITOL , NATURAL FLAVOUR , ACIDITY REGULATOR (330) , NATURAL STEVIA SWEETENER (960) , NATURAL CHLOROPHYLL COLOUR (141) , VITAMIN C (300) , PRESERVATIVE (223)
the natural cordial company
makes 10 litres
100% natural
no added sugar
no artificial flavours
no artificial colours
Lime
1 LITRE

The regulation dilemma

Although trademark law prohibits the registration of a trademark likely to deceive or cause confusion, owners of trademarks have exclusive rights to its use once registered. IP Australia, the regulatory authority tasked with approving trademark applications, doesn't require any nutritional testing of products prior to approval.

Kumudu Ramasundara, the acting general manager of the trademarks and design group at IP Australia, says that while the trademarks registrar has the power to approve or deny trademarks, control of the use of these trademarks falls with someone else – in the case of food products, Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), which is enforced by individual state authorities.

FSANZ is in the process of drafting the Standard for Nutrition, Health and Related Claims. The draft standard aims to ensure there is adequate scientific evidence for new health claims.

Under the current transitional standard, a package must not include the word "health" or any derivatives of this word in conjunction with the name of the food. But it is likely a product such as Uncle Toby's HealthWise cereal, which has added sugar, can dodge this requirement by including the word in a trademark. The transitional standard fails to define just how closely linked words must be to "health". Products such as preserved olives sold under the Always Fresh trademark or the mix of fresh and reconstituted local and imported orange juice sold under The Daily Juice Company banner, will not be covered by the new standard.

Federal trademark law trumps the application of food standards, which is carried out by individual state food authorities. Food labelling law expert Chris Preston says it is likely provisions in the current standard that rule against such trademarks are inconsistent with the trademark law, potentially making for "tremendous confusion", especially when it comes to the words he describes as the unholy trinity – pure, fresh and natural.

"There is a sense that trademarks enjoy a special privileged status, and although this argument has its merits, we don't know because there is no case law around this area," Preston says. Despite this, he argues it wouldn't be smart for new companies to embark on a marketing strategy that relies on a trademark that can't be substantiated, because there are still avenues to pursue misleading conduct through the Australian Consumer Law.

Too easy being green

As shoppers become more savvy about the environmental impacts of consumerism, businesses are finding ways to capitalise – but there is a difference between tapping into a general environmental awareness and greenwashing for financial gain. Research has found the significant trust consumers place in eco- and enviro-brands has a positive effect on purchasing behaviours and is likely to direct consumers towards products that claim to be less harmful to the environment than their alternatives. Consumers are also often willing to pay a premium for these purchases.

"Fresh", "safe" and "natural" are trigger words generally shared by products that claim to be good for the environment and those that claim to be good for your health, and it is this link that marketers of fast-moving consumer goods are increasingly coming to rely on. There is no requirement to prove environmental awareness in order to obtain a trademark that suggests this, nor are companies restricted from implying products that are good for the environment are also good for you.

Of the products with eco- and enviro-brand names we looked at, many offer poor nutritional content despite their advertised connection to healthiness. Mother Earth Baked Oaty Slices spruik their lack of artificial colours as well as being a high source of fibre and wholegrain cereals, but they're also high in saturated fat. Similarly, EnviroKidz Organic Koala Crisp and Gorilla Munch Cereals both have added sugar. A number of the Back to Nature and Goodness Superfoods Cereals are also high in sugar.

Tapping into the "free-from" craze, Freelicious Crackers are cooked in palm oil, which is high in saturated fat, as well as processed thickener and emulsifiers. Also available in health food shops, the Loving Earth Organic Activated Almond & Purple Corn Raw Dark Chocolate Bar is 25% saturated fat; CHOICE considers any food containing more than five per cent to be high in saturated fat.

Just because a brand name of a product suggests that it's healthy or natural, doesn't mean it always is

CHOICE verdict

It is important to remember that just because the brand name of a product suggests that it's healthy or natural doesn't mean it always is. Supermarket sections and, sometimes, entire aisles are dedicated to products promoted as "healthy". Coles and Woolworths have dedicated health food aisles in store and online, and while these aisles contain some healthy foods, such as nuts and dried fruits, they also have products that should be treated as more of an indulgence than a health food.

CHOICE is part of a government-led process to develop a front-of-pack labelling system that would help consumers know at a glance whether or not a product is healthy, cutting through these claims. ■

The road to fresh food

IMAGE: ED QUICK

In this extract from his new book, *Sustainable Food*, **Michael Mobbs** outlines the benefits of setting up a communal road garden

At its best, the idea that we can grow food in the street applies to every street, lane, city and person. All you have to do is decide which of the following options suit you.

Before you set up a community garden, you'll need the local council's permission. If you plan to have a road garden then plant outside your place first. Plant as much as you can of easy, tough little things such as mint and rosemary to larger citrus and feijoa. Choose plants that you think might suit the place – some do better in sun, some prefer shade.

Be sensitive to neighbours who aren't interested – be patient, avoid conflict and try to accommodate everyone. You might install public compost bins along your street and in a local park, but if residents or businesses want it moved, then move it. If you turn a couple into artworks and they don't like the art on one outside their place, then swap it or ask them to paint it themselves or to suggest another solution they prefer. You'll likely achieve acceptance and involvement through conversations and by being flexible in what is, after all, a shared space.

If you don't have a verge

Because these projects require concrete cutters, jackhammers, potential electrical and other services below the pavement, plus skips and noise and a general hullabaloo in the road, it's best to combine with as many neighbours and folks who will have different skills to contribute to this dynamic process.

First you need to remove only enough concrete or pavement to plant one fruit tree. You and your neighbours can then see how that tree grows before making room for more trees and plants.

If you don't want to fuss with jackhammers and the like, you could simply make a "no-dig" garden in a few hours of working alone.

If you have a verge

If you do have a verge you'll need:

Agreement from and, preferably, some participation by the folks who wish to have the road verge garden outside their house or building.

Soil If you've only got bitumen or cement, then the soil will have to go on top of it in a raised bed. Either way, expect the soil to be in poor condition, with few nutrients, low water-holding capacity and in need of lots of compost and mulch for the first few years.

Water Does your drain take your roof water to the street gutter? If so, make it leak so the rainwater goes into the soil.

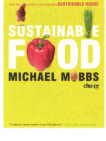
Sun Plant citrus on the sunny side of the street as they need at least six hours' sun.

Plants Get some robust and fun plants going including lemongrass, rosemary, strawberries, lime and lemon.

Compost Nutrients for both plants and the soil.

Mulch Protection for plants and soil.

Sustainable Food (CHOICE Books, $45, available from 1 November 2012) is written by Michael Mobbs, author of the best-selling *Sustainable House*. To purchase a copy, visit **choice.com.au/books**, or for stockists visit newsouthpublishing.com



No charge

Why are self-funded retirees being denied credit cards? **Andy Kollmorgen** investigates

Nutshell

- *Some CHOICE members are citing age discrimination when it comes to credit card applications.*
- *If you believe you've been unfairly knocked back for a credit card there are steps you can take.*

Making sure borrowers are creditworthy is essential to preventing financial systems from coming undone. For proof, look no further than the US lenders that handed out home loans like lollipops until late 2007 or so and then went bust as borrowers defaulted en masse, kicking off the global financial crisis.

The issues surrounding that event rightly gave rise to new responsible lending standards in Australia. But should credit card providers be allowed to turn you down just because your working days are over, regardless of your financial position? Judging by what consumers are telling CHOICE, some of Australia's largest financial institutions appear to be leaving a major demographic out of their risk evaluation scenarios.

A number of self-funded retirees have contacted us saying their credit card applications have been knocked back without due consideration.

Widespread denial

GE Capital's 28 Degrees MasterCard, which won the 2012 CHOICE Award for Best Travel Money Card, is a particular case in point. We still think it's a winner when it comes to fees and foreign exchange rates, but getting your hands on one may be easier said than done. Rosemary, a CHOICE member and self-funded retiree who owns her own house and is debt free "apart from credit card debt, which I pay in full each month", was refused a 28 Degrees card after applying online. So were members John, Sandy, Bob, Robin and Graeme.

Graeme said the refusal was based on his inability to show three payments to his bank account within a certain time frame in order to demonstrate a regular source of income. Providing a statement from a super fund account worth $3.5 million and a recent annual drawdown of $73,000 wasn't satisfactory.

"After a number of quite long phone calls, I was told that a letter from my accountants may help," Graeme told us. "At that point, I decided not to continue, but I do worry about my credit rating because of the decline."

Becky's attempt to get a 28 Degrees card for her 85-year-old mother-in-law, who owns her own apartment and has savings of $200,000 and an annual income of $23,000, met a similar fate. "I can only put the refusal down to her being too old, and maybe they thought she'd rack up a huge debt and then kick the bucket."

Knockbacks are also being delivered by the big banks. Rita's experience with ANZ, where she and her husband, John, have banked for 29 years, shows how difficult it can be even for long-time ▸

IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO

$37bn

The amount of credit card debt accruing interest in Australia as of July 2012

customers to achieve creditworthiness. Rita, who is 77, wanted to switch her ANZ Gold card into her name since her husband is about to turn 80 and lose access to the card's travel insurance. Despite having the card for 15 years, ANZ refused to make her the nominated holder. (She had better luck with the St. George Low Rate Gold card.)

Another self-funded retiree, Lurline, detected "blatant discrimination" when she was given the cold shoulder after applying for a Woolworths Everyday Rewards Credit Card. "I rang them about it and was told that was the policy. I pointed out that a self-funded retiree has more security money-wise than a young employed person."

And Bruce, 75, was "disgusted" after his request to have the limit on his Platinum Westpac Visa Altitude Card upped from $12,700 to $20,000 was refused. He asked for the increase because his daughter had recently had a skiing accident in Canada and was forced to come up with $22,000 in cash to pay medical bills. "As my wife and I regularly travel overseas, I thought it would be wise to have a greater limit on my credit card in case of an emergency." Bruce says he listed a monthly income of about $3000 and liquid assets of more than $100,000 on the application, but received a letter saying that wasn't enough for the bank to approve a limit increase.

Gary, a self-funded retiree who has been with the CBA for 20 years but whose credit card application was turned down by the bank, thinks it doesn't make any sense. "Self-funded retirees are a sound risk – normally signified by that status alone."

Disturbing trend

Whether a self-funded retiree's application is accepted appears to be hit or miss, since some frustrated self-funded retirees who contacted us eventually did end up being approved for credit cards by other banks.

Nevertheless, Wendy Schilg, CEO of the National Information Centre on Retirement Investments, an organisation that regularly hears from rebuffed retirees, detects a pattern.

"Banks just aren't giving credit cards to people who are retired, and a lot of it seems to have to do with online application processes that aren't designed to take their circumstances into account," she says. "We hear from people who own their home and have substantial assets who'd like to use a credit card to pay for home repairs or travel. In some cases, having their applications declined is pushing retirees towards more dangerous types of loans, such as reverse mortgages." (See **choice.com.au/reversemortgages**.)

Schilg suggests consumers either apply for a credit card that's suitable for their future needs before they retire or make sure the credit limit and other features of their existing card are appropriate.

enquiries about income that fail to identify an applicant's ability to meet repayments, that is their choice," ASIC communication manager Angela Friend told us. "They can't be forced to take into account additional information."

In July this year, the Australian Bankers' Association rejected the idea

The banks weigh in

CBA spokesperson Karen Wu disputes the notion of a deliberate effort to exclude retirees, telling us that "all customers, irrespective of their age or employment status" are subject to the same responsible lending treatment under the NCCP. The focus of a CBA credit check is on income,

Consumers can always apply for a credit card before they retire or make sure the credit limit and other features on their existing card are appropriate

The main piece of legislation that governs the behaviour of creditors, the National Consumer Credit Protection Act (NCCP), is silent on the issue of discriminatory behaviour. It lays out rules for responsible lending aimed at preventing borrowers from getting in over their heads, including the requirement that financial services providers make "reasonable inquiries" about an applicant's ability to repay.

ASIC has said inquiries should include not only questions about employment, expenses and income sources but also credit history, existing debt and overall assets. In its regulatory guide on responsible lending released in March 2011, ASIC cites a case study in which superannuation is identified as adequate proof of creditworthiness for a retiree.

In the Financial Ombudsman Service's (FOS – see page 38) interpretation of the NCCP, lenders should at least demand PAYG payslips or verification of self-employment income from tax returns and bank statements. But the FOS offers a broader version of creditworthiness, saying an extension of credit is suitable if "the consumer has the capacity to repay the loan without experiencing substantial hardship".

However, this leeway for defining creditworthiness doesn't appear to be helping self-funded retirees. According to ASIC, creditors can evaluate the capacity to repay however they like and decline any application under the NCCP. "If lenders choose to make narrow

of a US-style approach to ensuring that loans are made available to certain socioeconomic groups (the US Community Reinvestment Act exists to ensure low-income communities aren't denied credit). Philip Field, the lead ombudsman for banking and finance at the FOS, says "no bank is under an obligation to lend to anyone in Australia – you can't force an institution to lend to a particular group". But he also points out that any systemic attempt to deny loans to retirees could run counter to age discrimination laws.

but according to Wu, "an income does not have to be a salary payment – other examples of incomes can include pension payments". She maintains there is no pattern at CBA of an increase in declined applications for retirees.

GE Money media relations manager Louisa Walsh takes a similar line, and says "we appreciate the circumstances of individuals vary, and we do accept alternate income documentation, such as superannuation and rental income, to support applications". ■

What can you do?

We generally don't recommend that consumers increase their credit card liability, but being denied a credit card in an increasingly cashless society can make it difficult to access large segments of the marketplace, especially when it comes to travel. If your bank rejects your credit card application and you believe you should have been approved, you can ask the bank to review the decision. CBA, for instance, tells us "our branch staff can refer applications to our credit officers who have access to additional information about the customer which can be taken into account".

If this leads to further frustration, you can apply for a credit card from another institution, even if you don't have an account there. Be sure to read all the terms and conditions of any card you consider and watch out for teaser interest rates that go up after a few months, high penalty and/or annual fees, the number of interest-free days offered and how they are calculated, and how interest is calculated on cash advances (it generally starts accruing immediately). To compare financial offers, visit **choice.com.au/betterbanking**.

Tip

A debit card can be a good alternative, provided it meets your needs.

Trap

Paying by Bpay may count as a cash advance with some cards.

Here to help

Andy Kollmorgen looks at two ombudsman services that are worth getting to know

Ombudsmen are non-government intermediaries who can jump in on your behalf if you have a bona fide grievance with a goods or services provider that you can't resolve yourself. They're funded by the industries they oversee and their services are free for consumers. In effect, ombudsmen are paid to deal with consumer complaints that the service provider can't resolve to the customer's satisfaction. The expectation is that an ombudsman can persuade the wrongdoer to do the right thing. But do they have any real leverage?

Some consumers have told CHOICE their dealings with ombudsman services have left them less than satisfied. In the case of the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO), a conspiracy theorist might say that's because its board of directors is made up of former or current telco industry managers and executives.

Indeed, ombudsman services are set up as a kind of outsourced self-regulation. However, it's more likely that consumer frustration stems from having a poor understanding of what an ombudsman can and can't do. It's important to remember, for instance, that ombudsmen can't provide legal advice or represent you in court, and they can only deal with matters that fall within their terms of reference. You'll also need to have tried to settle the issue before they become involved. Sometimes, threatening to contact an ombudsman is enough to spur service providers into fixing your problem.

Two under the spotlight

The TIO and the Financial Ombudsman Service (FOS) look after two market sectors that generate many consumer complaints, but both services are making progress towards realising one of their central objectives – to persuade telcos and financial services providers to improve their own dispute resolution processes. Year on year, both services are receiving more complaints, but are having to become involved less often.

And there is evidence that both services are committed to getting better at what they do. The FOS hired 62 new people in 2010-11, increasing their staff force to 348 employees in June 2011. The service says it's serious about continuing to reduce dispute resolution times (the number of disputes resolved in 60 days or less rose 12% in 2010-11).

Meanwhile, the TIO says telcos are responding more quickly once the TIO gets involved, resulting in fewer detailed investigations. The statistics confirm it had progressively fewer complaints year on year in which it has had to intervene.

FOS payback

Most disputes with financial services providers are resolved between the customer and the relevant bank, credit provider, insurance company or other financial services provider, with the FOS refereeing from the sidelines. However, should the FOS step in and make an official recommendation or determination in your favour, it can require a financial service provider to:

- Pay you a sum of money
- Waive, vary the terms or release security for a debt
- Repay, waive or vary a fee including interest rates on a loan
- Vary the terms of a credit contract in cases of financial hardship
- Honour an insurance policy claim

FOS & TIO Side by Side

FOS
FINANCIAL OMBUDSMAN SERVICE

1300 78 08 08 | fos.org.au

Funded by
12,853 financial services providers (FSPs) who are FOS members. ASIC requires that all FSPs have an external dispute resolution process, although not all are FOS members.

Call them for disputes about
- Credit cards or loans
- Insurance claims
- Banks, credit unions and building societies
- Financial planners/investment managers
- EFTPOS, foreign currency transfers, loyalty programs, gift cards

Don't call them about
- Level of a fee, premium, charge or interest rate unless it's incorrectly applied or inadequately disclosed
- Methods used to assess credit risk or the amount of security required for a loan
- How insurance premiums are determined or the premium amount
- Investment performance unless there is an issue of non-disclosure or misinformation
- Super fund management

Report card
- 3012 of the 28,826 resolved disputes in 2010-11 (out of 36,095 received) required an FOS decision. Those remaining were worked out between the customer and provider
- 1170 decisions were in favour of customers, 1529 favoured the FSP (in 313 cases the FOS approved an FSP's offer to customers)

Dispute deadlines
- For issues that fall under the National Credit Code, customers have two years from the end of the credit contract or the end of any internal dispute resolution process with the provider to complain to the FOS
- For other issues, consumers have six years from when they became aware of the issue, or two years from the end of any internal dispute resolution process with the provider

Powers
- As a first step toward resolution, the FOS makes a recommendation that is binding if both parties agree to it within 30 days
- If the FSP doesn't agree but the customer does, the FOS can make a determination that is binding. If the customer doesn't agree, they can take the matter to court

36,095 disputes in 2011-12 up 19% from 2010-11

An FSP has 45 days to resolve a dispute brought by a customer, or by the FOS on behalf of a customer, before the FOS will consider officially taking on a case

197,682 complaints in 2010-11, up about 18% from 2009-2010

52,231 complaints were received between January-March 2012, almost two-thirds of which were about mobile phone services

TIO
1800 06 20 58 | tio.com.au

Funded by
1214 telcos. All businesses that provide or re-sell telecommunications services to consumers or small businesses are legally required to join the TIO. Providers are charged by the TIO per complaint if it investigates.

Call them for disputes about
- Landlines
- Mobiles
- Internet services

Don't call them about
- Equipment supplied by a telco
- Cabling beyond the network termination point except to the first telephone
- Commercial activity by telcos outside of connection services
- Tariffs and rates
- Anti-competitive behaviour or restrictive practices that may breach the Competition and Consumer Act
- Content provided by a telco
- Matters that are or have been under consideration by ACMA, the ACCC or any court or tribunal

Report card
- 177,047 of the 2010-11 complaints were resolved by mutual consent between the provider and customer after the TIO was contacted
- 17,863 required the TIO to conciliate a resolution
- 2772 were considered for a binding decision or direction by the TIO
- 39,928 enquiries required the TIO to direct the customer to contact the telco in the first instance or the issue was outside the TIO's jurisdiction

Dispute deadlines
- Customers have one year from the time they become aware of the issue to make a complaint, though the timeframe may be extended to two years in some cases
- The TIO will allow 10 working days for the telco to respond to the dispute before it becomes formally involved

Powers
- There are four complaint levels: at level three the TIO can make binding decisions for up to $1200
- For level four complaints made since July 2012, the TIO has the power to make binding decisions up to $50,000 and recommendations up to $100,000
- For level four complaints made before July 2012, the limits are $30,000 for binding decisions and $85,000 for recommendations ■

Ask the Experts

Got a niggling question our team can help with?

What device do I need to buy to connect my TV to my internet so I can watch ABC iView?

CHOICE TV expert Scott O'Keefe responds: All "smart" TVs now have internet functionality built-in, and many of these have an app for iView. If your TV is one of these, then it just needs to be connected to the home network. This can be done via an ethernet cable, or wirelessly if the TV supports it. Some TVs have Wi-Fi built-in, and others can have Wi-Fi added by way of a USB adapter.

If your TV is not smart, then you need to get the smarts from another device. The easiest solution is to buy a smart Blu-ray player (see page 58), set-top box, media centre or games console. Connect that to your home network and the TV. Another option is to access iView via a computer, and connect the computer to the TV via HDMI or VGA, depending on the specs of both your computer and TV.

Ask us

Do you have a question for one of CHOICE's experts? Email us at ***asktheexperts@choice.com.au*** *or write to us at Ask the Experts, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204.*

For a year now I've refused to use any bleach because I see it going down the drain and out to sea and doing terrible things to the underwater sphere. Is there such a thing as an eco-friendly bleach or stain remover?

CHOICE expert Karina Bray replies: Bleach can in fact be a safe and effective product. Also known as sodium hypochlorite (NaClO), bleach is an environmentally safe compound that breaks down very quickly and easily into its salt (NaCl) and oxygen components. As it can give off dangerous fumes, you should avoid using it in confined spaces. Bleach is also recommended by the WHO for adding to contaminated water to kill germs, so if properly diluted it's fit for human consumption.

Some other suggestions from our laundry team include washing or baking soda, vinegar, borax, lemon juice and sunlight, though we can't vouch for their effectiveness.

I've noticed lots of new food products that include not just nuts, but "activated nuts". What does this mean and are they more beneficial than regular nuts?

CHOICE journalist Elise Dalley replies: We asked accredited practising dietitian Melanie McGrice from Health Kick Nutrition to give us her view.

"Raw nuts naturally contain enzyme inhibitors, such as phytic acid, that act to inhibit the germination process in nuts until conditions are optimal," McGrice says. "These chemicals are thought to limit the absorption of nutrients from the nut and also mean the body has to work a lot harder in digestion. This may place added stress on your body's digestive system and is why some people can have bloating, stomach cramps and constipation when consuming large amounts.

"The process of nut activation involves soaking nuts in salt water in a warm environment and then roasting them in the oven on a low heat until dry. This is thought to mimic the germination process, deactivating the enzyme inhibitors and making nutrients available for absorption. The drying process at a low temperature also assists with digestion. However, take care to ensure temperatures aren't too high as this can remove the nutritional value from nuts."

So while there are benefits of nut activation, we recommend weighing up the price difference before forking out the extra cash for activated nuts, as regular, un-activated ones still provide nutritional benefit. ■

On Test

All-in-one kitchen machines, cooktops, camcorders and mowers – they're all here

42 All-in-one kitchen machines
Do new players upstart the longstanding kitchen king?

45 Ceramic cooktops
A combination of elements sets apart the best from the worst

49 Dishwashers
Why bigger isn't always better

53 Recording real life
How do multitasking devices compete with the dedicated master of movie making?

58 Recording TV
Watch what you want, when you want – not when the networks want you to

62 Ice-cream makers
Is homemade more trouble than it's worth?

63 Lawnmowers
The one that will help you win the neighbourhood turf war

66 Steam mops
How do these mean, "green" cleaning machines scrub up?

70 Battery chargers
Give your rechargeables their best chance to shine

72 Portable air conditioners
Convenient, but also a potential cash trap

CHOICE's Rebecca Ciaramidaro takes steam mops for a ride

Is chemical-free cleaning all it's cracked up to be? Find out on page 66

CHOICE. The People's Watchdog

CHOICE'S experienced technical staff puts products through their paces in our own testing laboratories. We use test methods based on Australian standards and develop our own to match the way consumers use a product in their homes. We buy the products we test, maintaining our independence from manufacturers and so we know what you're faced with in the shops. We've checked the models are available at the time we publish. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

CHOICE Shopper
For the best deal on products where you see this logo, call 1300 360 655. Have the model name and number, the price you've been quoted and your CHOICE subscriber number.

CHOICE Online
Wherever you see a mouse icon, there is more information about this test at **choice.com.au**.

CHOICE Best Buy
Our testers award a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report includes Best Buys.

CHOICE Green Buy
Our researchers award a Green Buy to a product that delivers good quality and environmental performance. Not every test report includes Green Buys.

The challengers

Can any of these kitchen machines supplant the Thermomix titan? **Rebecca Ciaramidaro** finds out

We first tested the Thermomix as a First Look back in 2010. Since then, a number of young wannabes have sought to topple the king of kitchen machines, and members have been clamouring for us to test their claims directly against the Thermomix to see whether its high price is worth it.

Our home economist, Fiona Mair, put some of these machines through their paces and is impressed with the performance of all of them. They are real multi-taskers (see opposite), and the Thermomix and ThermoChef even have inbuilt scales. While they're all capable of a number of tasks, it's ease of use that sets them apart. The Bellini and ThermoChef both come close to the Thermomix on performance, but when it comes to ease of use, the Thermomix is miles ahead.

The Thermomix is undoubtedly the best kitchen machine that we've tested to date, which is why we score it above the others. Whether it's $1500 or so better than the Bellini depends on how much you value clear instructions and a fiddle-free life.

Nutshell

▶ We've tested the Thermomix and ThermoChef as First Looks in the past; here we add one more kitchen machine into the mix and also look at the Kenwood Cooking Chef.

▶ The differences between these machines lie in their construction and ease of use.

	Price ($)	PERFORMANCE: Overall score (%)	PERFORMANCE: Performance score (%)	PERFORMANCE: Ease of use score (%)	FEATURES: Cord storage	FEATURES: Pulse function	FEATURES: Blade / attachment storage
Thermomix TM31	1939 (A)	90	90	90	✓	✓	✓ (E)
Bellini Intelli Kitchen Master BTMKM510W	399	74	87	55		✓	✓ (E)
ThermoChef Natura	795 (B)	74	80	65	(C)	(D)	✓ (E)

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail, as of September 2012. **Scores** The overall score is made up of performance (60%) and ease of use **(C)** The cord is detachable and can be stored inside the jug. **(D)** Turbo boost. **(E)** Storage is inside the mixing bowl. **(F)** It's recommended not to leave

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Controls should be easy to use and comprehend with clear labelling and/or a bright digital display.

Inbuilt scales allow you to weigh food as you go.

Instructions should be detailed and comprehensive, especially if you haven't used this type of appliance before. They should also come with a number of recipes to get you started.

As few **attachments** as possible makes storage easier. The Thermomix, ThermoChef and Bellini come with a mixing bowl and lid, simmer basket, stirring attachment, measuring cup, spatula and steaming basket, while the Kenwood (see page 44) comes with all the accessories of a normal benchtop mixer along with an additional food processor attachment.

Comfortable handles that are well-insulated are useful. These bowls can get heavy with a full load and the handles can get hot after cooking for long periods.

Surfaces should be easy to clean with few cracks and crevices where food can become trapped.

WHAT TO BUY

90%

Thermomix TM31

$1939

Good points

- Excellent for cooking performance and ease of use
- Can cook enough for six adults
- All components are dishwasher safe
- Incorporates nine functions that can replace some small appliances
- Includes a comprehensive instruction booklet with recipes that are easy to follow and adjust
- Has scales that can be used as you go
- Standby mode

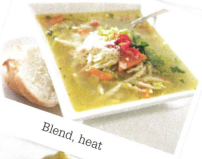
Bad points

- Expensive
- Some mixtures can boil over into the lid

These machines are true multi-taskers. They can:

- chop
- grind
- knead
- mince
- grate
- juice
- stir
- steam
- blend

Beat, mix



Blend, heat

Whip, beat

SPECIFICATIONS

	Chopping blade	Steamer	Dishwasher-safe accessories	Maximum bowl capacity (mL)	Weight (kg)	Dimensions* (cm, H x W x D)	Contact
Bellini	✓		✓	2000	6.3	30 x 28.5 x 28.5	thermomix.com.au
Kenwood	✓	✓	✓ (F)	2000	5.1	31 x 40 x 23	bellinappliances.com.au
Thermomix	✓		✓ (G)	2000	6.3	30 x 34 x 28	newwavekitchenappliances.com.au

Look For, above. **TABLE NOTES (A)** Can pay in installments. **(B)** $40 Australia-wide for domestic shipping.
periods of time. **(G)** Except the blending bowl. * Excludes steamer.

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ABOUT THE REST

If you're not familiar with kitchen machines, it'll take some time to get used to the **Bellini** as its instructions and recipes are limited. The unit is very stable on the bench, however the jug vibrates when mixing heavy dough. You can make adjustments without turning the machine off, but if you stop it to scrape the bowl or check the food you'll then need to reset the temperature, time and speed. It's

At $399 the Bellini Intelli Kitchen Master is worth considering

difficult to remove heavy batters from around the blade and scraping the sides of the bowl is awkward. The digital display can be difficult to read unless you're at eye level. While the blades are very easy to assemble and disassemble, the lid can be stiff to open and close, and baked-on food can be difficult to clean. When cooking, it's slow to respond to temperature change, especially when lowering the temperature. Boiling liquids can bubble out onto the bench, and meats and vegetables can become shredded when being braised. However, at $399, the Bellini gets the job done and is still worth considering.

The **ThermoChef** is also worth considering as it has the same features as the Thermomix at less than half the price. It performs well across most cooking tests and is easy to use once you're familiar with it, with fairly clear labelling and push-button controls, though its large digital display can be difficult to read unless you're at eye level. The lid requires some strength to open and close, and we found it difficult to fit (likewise the steaming basket). Recipes with several steps require you to select the function, speed, time and temperature multiple times during cooking, which can become annoying.

Fiona found removing heavy batters difficult, and liquid can splash out when mixing wet ingredients if the measuring cup isn't in position. It can be difficult to clean baked-on food and browning that occurs during braising – to make it easier, run through a cycle with water and detergent. ■

Beat, whip

What about the Kenwood?

The **Kenwood Cooking Chef KM070** ($1999) is different in design to the other all-in-one machines and we felt it was unfair to compare it directly. It looks like a traditional Kenwood Chef benchtop mixer, but comes with an induction heating element that allows you to cook food in it as well.

While the Kenwood can perform the same functions as the other machines on test, you'll need to use separate attachments to achieve the same results that the other ones can do in one bowl. It comes with a flexible beater, whisk beater and hook attachment for stirring, plus a food processor attachment and steamer. However, there are many optional attachments you can buy for the Cooking Chef that add to the already-hefty price tag while taking up lots of space in your kitchen cupboards. It's also very heavy at 14kg and only has a three-litre cooking capacity (six litres if you're not cooking).

The Cooking Chef's cooking time, temperature and speed can be adjusted at any time without stopping the machine, and the induction heating is very responsive to temperature change. Take care when using high temperatures, as Fiona found the mixing bowl reached 88°C when cooking at 140°C.

The controls are easy to use and its splash guard contains splatters. The unit vibrates and moves along the bench when mixing heavy dough, and the large lift lever can be fiddly when releasing the motor head to open and close. The large bowl tightens itself onto the unit so it can be difficult to remove, and it can be awkward to clean in a domestic sink. No parts are dishwasher safe, and the stainless steel exterior and bowl require more attention when cleaning. Some parts can be stored in the bowl, but there's no separate storage box for attachments. According to its instructions, the unit isn't suitable if you have a pacemaker or other active implant.

The Cooking Chef is very good for performance and OK for ease of use, but unnecessary if you already have a benchtop mixer and cooktop. For general cooking Fiona found it to be more of an effort than cooking on a cooktop, but she did find it useful when cooking foods that needed constant stirring over a long time, such as risotto.

Steady as she goes

Ceramic cooktops may not be as sexy as their induction cousins, but they still perform well, says **Rebecca Ciaramidaro**

Induction cooktops are all the rage right now, and many people can't see past the benefits of gas, but ceramic cooktops shouldn't be dismissed. They may not be as responsive as gas or induction, but they're still impressive performers and cost much less than induction models.

The base of all cookware should match the diameter of the cooking zone to provide good contact with the ceramic cooktop surface

We tested 10 ceramic cooktops ranging from $639 to $1690 and found them to be very good or excellent across most of our cooking performance tests. Seven make our What to Buy list (page 46-47), and for the three that miss out it's their ease of use that separates them from the rest.

Think it over

It's important to consider the position, layout and size of the elements before you buy. Ideally, there should be a range of simmer, medium and large elements that are adequately spaced so you can use multiple pots at once. If your kitchen can accommodate one, rectangular cooktops such as the Smeg SA911XA and Westinghouse PHR395U have this sort of configuration. If not, ▸

Nutshell

- We recommend seven models in our latest test of radiant ceramic cooktops.
- It's mostly ease of use that separates the best from the rest.

square cooktops should have the simmer element at the front, so you don't need to reach over a large element to stir.

Also think about the pots and pans you use – will they fit comfortably over the cooking zone or cause restricted use of the other elements? The base of all cookware should be flat and smooth, and match the diameter of the cooking zone to provide good contact with the ceramic cooktop surface. However, bear in mind that aluminium and copper-based cookware can leave behind a metallic residue that is difficult to remove.

The Blanco BCCK60N, Chef and DeLonghi DECH60S have only two simmer and two medium cooking zones and can't accommodate a pan that's more than 20cm in diameter, so they're not ideal if you tend to use larger pans. See What to Look For (page 48), for other aspects to consider before buying.

WHAT TO BUY

85%
Smeg SA911XA

Good points
- Timer, child lock, touch controls and overheat temperature detection
- Good selection of cooking zones
- Good indication of controls in operation
- Casserole and large dual elements
- Plenty of space around each element

Bad points
- You may need to refer to the manual initially for control instructions

83%
Fisher & Paykel CE604DTB1

Good points
- Timer, child lock, power boost and touch controls
- Good selection of cooking zones
- Good indication of controls in operation
- Dual cooking zone
- Glass scraper included

Bad points
- Controls are close to cooking zones
- You may need to refer to the manual initially for control instructions

	PERFORMANCE								FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS			
					COOKING PERFORMANCE										
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Cooking performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Low-heat setting score (%)	Turn-down capacity score (%)	Sensitive heating score (%)	High-heat setting score (%)	Timer	Child lock	Automatic switch off	Control type	Number of elements	Cooking surface dimensions (cm, W x D)
DeLonghi DTCH60B	1229	85	89	80	80	90	100	85	✓	✓	✓	Touch	4	59 x 51
• **Smeg** SA911XA	1690	85	85	84	75	90	100	75	✓	✓	✓	Touch	4	90 x 52
Westinghouse PHN768U	1219	84	85	82	60	80	100	100	✓	✓	✓	Touch	4	61 x 51.5
Electrolux EHET66CS	1269	83	90	72	60	100	100	100	✓	✓	✓	Touch	4	61 x 53
• **Fisher & Paykel** CE604DTB1	959	83	84	81	75	90	100	70	✓	✓	✓	Touch	4	60 x 53
• **Samsung** CTR164NC01	899	83	85	81	75	90	100	75	✓	✓	✓	Touch	4	58 x 51
Omega OC65TA	649	82	83	81	60	80	100	90	✓	✓	✓	Touch	4	58 x 51
• **Westinghouse** PHR395U	949	82	86	75	75	85	100	85				Dial	4	93 x 52
Miele KM 5600	1199	81	83	78	60	70	100	100		✓	✓	Touch	4	57.5 x 50.5
• **Westinghouse** PHR284U	769	81	84	76	75	75	100	85				Dial	4	61 x52
• **Asko** HC1651S	1099	80	85	72	75	90	100	75	✓	✓	✓	Touch	4	58.5 x 51.5
• **Bosch** PKN675N14A	1299	80	84	74	75	75	100	85	✓	✓	✓	Touch	4	61 x 53
Smeg SA611XA	990	80	79	82	60	70	100	85		✓	✓	Touch	4	59 x 52
Fisher & Paykel CE604CBX1	779	78	86	66	60	90	100	95				Dial	4	60 x 53
• **Blanco** BCCK60N	799	77	84	66	75	90	100	70				Dial	4	58 x 51
Blanco BCCT63X	1399	77	80	72	65	80	100	75		✓	✓	Touch	3	58.5 x 51.5
• **Chef** EHC647U (A)	639	76	81	69	75	75	100	75				Dial	4	61 x 52
• **DeLonghi** DECH60S	899	74	79	67	75	70	100	70				Dial	4	59 x 51
Bosch PKE645C14A	849	73	79	63	70	70	100	75				Dial	4	57.5 x 51.5

83%
Samsung CTR164NC01

Good points
- Timer, child lock, touch controls and overheat temperature detection
- Good selection of cooking zones
- Good indication of controls in operation
- Casserole and large dual elements
- Glass scraper included

Bad points
- Controls are close to the cooking zone
- You may need to refer to the manual initially for control instructions

82%
Westinghouse PHR395U

Good points
- Basic, easy-to-use dial controls
- Good indication of controls in operation
- Glass scraper and cleaner included
- Plenty of space around each element

Bad points
- Children can access all controls
- Simmer burner is at the back

81%
Westinghouse PHR284U

Good points
- Good selection of cooking zones
- Basic, easy-to-use dial controls
- Good indication of controls in operation
- Glass scraper and cleaner included

Bad points
- Surface temperatures can become very hot near controls
- Controls are too close to the cooking zones
- Children can access some controls

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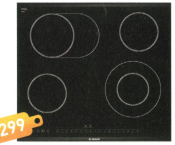
dimensions (cm, W x D)	Contact
6 x 49	delonghi.com.au
6 x 49	smeg.com.au
7 x 49	westinghouse.com.au
6 x 49	electrolux.com.au
6 x 49	fisherpaykel.com.au
6 x 49	samsung.com.au
6 x 49	omegaappliances.com.au
8 x 49	westinghouse.com.au
6 x 49	miele.com.au
6 x 49	westinghouse.com.au
6.5 x 49.5	asko.com.au
6 x 50	boschappliances.com.au
6 x 49	smeg.com.au
6 x 49	fisherpaykel.com.au
6 x 49	blanco-australia.com
6.5 x 49.5 (B)	blanco-australia.com
6 x 49	chefappliances.com.au
6 x 49	delonghi.com.au
6 x 50	boschappliances.com.au

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail, as of September 2012. **Scores** The overall score is made up of performance (60%) and ease of use (40%). **TABLE NOTES (A)** This model has been replaced by the EHC647UC. There are no differences between the two. **(B)** Without frame.

80%
Asko HC1651S

Good points
- Timer, child lock, power boost and touch controls
- Good selection of cooking zones
- Good indication of controls in operation
- Two dual cooking zones
- Glass scraper included

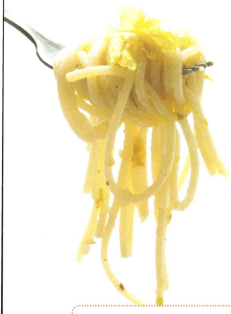
Bad points
- Controls are too close to the cooking zone and a little confusing – you may need to refer to the manual initially
- Stainless steel edge can trap dirt
- Surface temperature can become very hot near controls



80%
Bosch PKN675N14A

Good points
- Timer, child lock, power boost and touch controls
- Good selection of cooking zones
- Good indication of controls in operation
- Casserole and large dual elements

Bad points
- Controls are too close to the two front cooking zones
- You may need to refer to the manual initially for control instructions
- Stainless steel strip on two sides can trap dirt
- Surface temperature can become very hot near controls



PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

DeLonghi DTCH60B	$1229
Westinghouse PHN768U	$1219
Electrolux EHET66CS	$1269
Omega OC65TA	$649
Miele KM 5600	$999
Smeg SA611XA	$990

(All in *CHOICE*, Sept 2011)

ABOUT THE REST

The **Blanco BCCK60N**, **Chef** and **DeLonghi DECH60S** are good overall and worth considering. The Blanco and Chef are very good for cooking performance, while the DeLonghi is good. But they're only OK for ease of use, scoring the lowest among the models on test.

They all have dial controls that are easy to use and comprehend. However, children can access some or all of the controls, some of which are too close to the cooking zones. Cooking zones are positioned well, but with only two simmer and two medium elements these cooktops may not be suitable for pans with a larger surface area. Surface temperatures can also become dangerously hot near controls. The Chef comes with a glass scraper and cleaner. ■

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Elements Consider the position, layout and size of the elements in relation to the pots and pans you usually use. Elements should be spaced out, and simmer elements should be located at the front.

Dual elements with two or more heat rings are handy – you can activate the inner ring for smaller pots or both rings for larger pots.

Size and shape Cooktops are either square or rectangular in shape and their elements come in various configurations. Check you have the room and ventilation space to accommodate the one you're interested in first. Retailers should be able to provide the specs and installation requirements before you buy.

Dial controls should be easy to remove for cleaning. A seal around the controls is good to prevent any spillages getting inside the workings. Touch controls are even easier to clean.

The **surface** should be easy to clean with few or no areas that can trap dirt. The cooktop should be able to contain reasonable spills, but some ceramic cooktops don't have a lip or rim to do this. This may make them easier to clean, but also messier in the event of a spill.

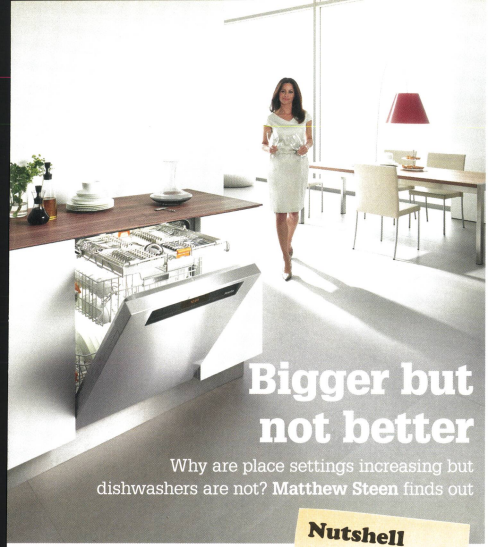
Touch controls should be logical and not positioned too close to the cooking zones.

Power Electric elements are rated in kW. A good range is 1.2-2.2kW.

Residual heat warning light should stay on until the cooktop returns to a safe level as many electric cooktops remain hot long after the heat is turned off, posing a safety hazard.

Automatic switch off After turning on the cooking surface, if a heat setting is not selected for a cooking zone within about 10 seconds, the cooking surface will automatically switch itself off. This also happens if a heat setting is selected and a pot has not made contact with the element within a similar timeframe.

IMAGE: FISHER & PAYKEL



Bigger but not better

Why are place settings increasing but dishwashers are not? **Matthew Steen** finds out

Nutshell

- Four new dishwashers on test; one makes our What to Buy list.
- Despite increasing place settings, dishwasher cabinets aren't getting any bigger.

The energy and water star rating systems are great tools for encouraging manufacturers to do the right thing, but only if the manufacturer doesn't try to circumvent the spirit of those systems.

By increasing the number of place settings in a dishwasher, a manufacturer can improve its star ratings because more plates, bowls and cutlery can be washed in a single cycle. That's good for them, because more stars means more sales. However, we've found that many of these tacked-on place settings just aren't practical. Rather than cramming in extra place settings, CHOICE believes some manufacturers should instead be investing more in their research and development to decrease energy and water usage while maintaining washing performance.

Quality, not quantity

When you go dishwasher shopping, don't be distracted by the salesperson urging you to go larger. Think about the maximum number of people you're likely to have round for dinner and go for a model with a corresponding number of place settings, matched with the best performance and reliability (see pages 50 and 52). Also take in any of your items that are unusual in shape or size to make sure they fit.

IMAGE: MIELE

WHAT TO BUY

AEG, Dishlex, Electrolux and LG don't have as high a reliability rating as other recommended brands. For profiles of all dishwashers on test, plus similar models and those we couldn't include in the table, log on to **choice.com.au/dishwashers**.

STANDARD

77%

Miele G5935 SCi XXL

Good points

- Excellent drying
- Very good water efficiency
- Child lock door
- Fold-down tines
- End-of-wash signal
- Door opens at the end of the program
- Has auto-wash program

Bad points

- Long cycle time
- Relatively expensive to buy and run

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

STANDARD

Electrolux ESF66814XR (Apr 12)	$1639
Dishlex DX301WK (Feb 10)	$1009
LG LD1454TFES2 (Aug 12)	$1599
Miele G5141i (Nov 11)	$1699

COMPACT

Bosch SKE53M05AU (May 11)	$1049

(Month and year refers to *CHOICE* issue in which model was first profiled.)

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		COSTS		PERFORMANCE										FEATURES		
		Price ($)*	Running cost ($/10 years)	Overall score (%)	Washing performance score (%)	Water efficiency score (%)	Drying performance score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Water used (L)	Energy used (kWh)	Noise (dB)	Cycle time (mins)	Auto program/ dirt sensor	Easy-to-lift, height-adjustable top basket	Fold-down/ removable
STANDARD	**Electrolux** ESF66814XR	1639	1607	78	76	87	91	62	13	1.57	39	152	✓	✓	F
	Dishlex DX301WK	1009	1643	77	80	67	92	62	21	1.57	48	114	✓	✓	F
	LG LD1419W2 (A)	899	1539	77	76	71	95	66	23	1.45	42	173	✓	✓	F
	LG LD1454TFES2	1599	1245	77	70	85	98	73	16	1.19	47	158	✓	✓	F
	Miele G5141i	1699	1520	77	73	87	97	64	14	1.49	40	141	✓	✓	F
	• **Miele** G5935 SCi XXL	3749	1424	77	71	89	98	67	14	1.39	48	146	✓	✓	F, R
	• **Bosch** SMS50E52AU/55	999	632	76	75	91	46	92	12	0.57	45	146		✓	F
	Bosch SMS63M08AU	1449	1125	76	67	92	93	76	12	1.10	37	125	✓	✓	F
	Dishlex DX103WK	739	1792	76	78	67	95	57	21	1.73	48	113			
	Dishlex DX203WK	849	1512	76	74	76	91	66	17	1.44	50	100			
	Miele G5300 SC	1799	1561	76	71	87	97	63	15	1.53	37	141	✓	✓	F
	Miele G5775 SCVi XXL	2549	1409	76	68	90	99	68	14	1.38	45	146	✓	✓	F
	Smeg DWA157X	1499	1170	76	73	93	74	75	12	1.14	48	163	✓	✓	F
	LG LD1452WFEN2	999	1225	75	67	84	97	74	16	1.16	50	157	✓	✓	F
	Miele G5500 SCU	1899	1529	75	69	87	95	64	15	1.50	49	131	✓	✓	F
	• **Samsung** DW-FG520W	999	764	75	72	92	56	87	11	0.72	47	154		✓	F
	Smeg STH903	2690	1249	75	69	87	87	72	13	1.22	52	110		na	F
	Westinghouse WSF6602WR	949	1655	75	74	78	91	61	18	1.61	45	115		✓	
	AEG F88089MOP	2099	1599	74	69	87	93	62	14	1.58	35	154	✓	✓	F
	Bosch SMU68M05AU	1599	1150	74	64	94	88	75	12	1.12	38	133	✓	✓	F
	Miele G4101i	1299	1810	74	74	74	94	57	21	1.75	43	144	✓	✓	F
	Smeg DWA149W	999	1623	74	69	83	92	62	16	1.57	46	123		✓	F
	V-Zug Adora 60SL	2990	1472	74	73	66	91	67	21	1.39	50	105	✓	✓	F
	Westinghouse WSU6603XR	1219	1675	74	72	80	88	60	17	1.64	43	146	✓	✓	
	Ariston LFF825X	1499	1676	73	68	86	90	61	15	1.60	48	129		✓	F
	Asko D5424WH	1099	1111	73	68	88	72	77	14	1.06	55	108			
	LG LD-1421T2 (A)	1349	1613	73	71	68	94	64	24	1.52	43	175	✓	✓	F
	Ariston LBF51	699	1759	72	70	83	84	58	16	1.69	49	138		✓	
	Asko D5644SS	1799	1713	72	71	82	78	59	17	1.65	49	162	✓	✓	F
	Fisher & Paykel DD60DCW7	1579	1408	72	64	85	93	69	15	1.35	49	129		na	F, R
	Fisher & Paykel DW60DOX1	1099	1541	72	69	86	78	64	15	1.49	36	147	✓	✓	F
	Indesit DFG261S	799	1550	72	66	84	89	65	16	1.47	44	133		✓	
	Whirlpool ADP8000WH	649	860	72	67	90	57	84	11	0.82	47	132		✓	F
	Asko D5434 (B)	1299	1688	71	74	82	60	60	17	1.65	44	165	✓		F
	DeLonghi DEDW60S	999	980	71	64	88	70	81	12	0.94	48	133		✓	F
	Fisher & Paykel DW60CCW1	849	1586	71	68	79	80	64	19	1.51	54	130	✓	✓	F
	Fisher & Paykel DW60CEW1	759	1423	71	63	90	88	67	13	1.39	52	121		✓	F
	• **Haier** HDW300SS	699	939	70	65	89	58	82	12	0.90	53	118		✓	F
SLIM/COMPACT	**Fisher & Paykel** DD60SCW7	900	720	76	67	85	90	88	8	0.69	48	127		na	F, R
	Fisher & Paykel DD60SDFTX7	1210	749	76	67	84	90	88	8	0.71	50	127		na	F, R
	Bosch SCE53M05AU	1299	807	75	65	87	91	86	8	0.77	49	125	✓		F
	Bosch SKE53M05AU	1049	807	75	70	68	89	86	10	0.77	45	166	✓	na	F
	Omega DW101WA	499	559	70	69	76	42	94	9	0.49	46	109		na (C)	

SPECIFICATIONS								
Half-load option	Eco wash	Fast wash	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Water connection	Place settings	Type*	Colour*	Contact
	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 58	C only	13	SI	SS	electrolux.com.au
	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 60	C rec	12	FW	W	dishlex.com.au
✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	W	lg.com.au
✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	SS	lg.com.au
	✓	✓	81 x 60 x 57	H or C	14	BI	SS	miele.com.au
		✓	85 x 60 x 57	H or C	15	SI	SS	miele.com.au
✓		✓	82 x 55 x 60	C rec	14	FW	W	bosch.com.au
✓		✓	82 x 60 x 60	C only	14	FW	SS	bosch.com.au
	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 61	H or C	12	FW	W	dishlex.com.au
	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 58	C rec	12	FW	W	dishlex.com.au
	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	W	miele.com.au
✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 57	H or C	15	FI	FI	miele.com.au
✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	15	FW	SS	smeg.com.au
✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	W	lg.com.au
	✓	✓	81 x 60 x 57	H or C	14	BI	W	miele.com.au
✓		✓	85 x 60 x 57	C	13	FW	W	samsung.com.au
✓	✓	✓	86 x 58 x 55	C only	12	FI	FI	smeg.com.au
	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 62	C only	13	FW	W	westinghouse.com.au
	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 60	C only	13	BI	SS	aegaustralia.com.au
✓		✓	82 x 60 x 57	C rec	15	SI	SS	bosch.com.au
	✓	✓	81 x 60 x 57	H or C	14	BI	SS	miele.com.au
	✓		85 x 60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	W	smeg.com.au
✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 57	H or C	12	SI	SS	vzug.com
	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 58	C only	13	BI	SS	westinghouse.com.au
✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	SS	aristonbrand.com
	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 55	H or C	14	SI	W	asko.com.au
✓	✓	✓	85 x 61 x 60	H or C	14	FW	SS	lg.com.au
	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	W	aristonbrand.com
	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 55	H or C	14	SI	SS	asko.com.au
	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 59	C rec	14	SI	W	fp.com.au
	✓(D)	✓(D)	82 x 60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	SS	fp.com.au
✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	H or C	14	FW	SS	arisit.com
✓		✓	85 x 60 x 59	H or C	12	FW	W	whirlpool.com.au
	✓	✓	82 x 60 x 55	H or C	14	BI	W	asko.com.au
✓		✓	85 x 60 x 58	H or C	12	FW	SS	delonghi.com.au
✓	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	W	fp.com.au
	✓	✓	85 x 60 x 60	C rec	14	FW	W	fp.com.au
✓		✓	85 x 60 x 60	C only	12	FW	SS	haierlife.com.au
	✓	✓	41 x 60 x 59	C rec	7	BI	W	fp.com.au
	✓	✓	41 x 60 x 59	C rec	7	BI	SS	fp.com.au
		✓	60 x 60 x 48	C rec	8	BI	SS	bosch.com.au
		✓	46 x 60 x 50	H or C	6	BI	SS	bosch.com.au
		✓	44 x 55 x 50	H or C	6	FW	W	omegaappliances.com.au

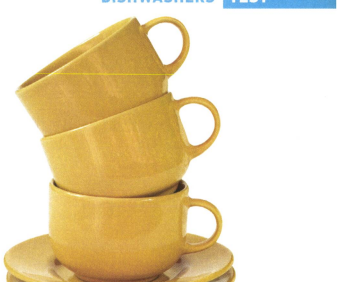

IMAGE: ISTOCK PHOTO

In our previous test we published results for the LG LD1454TFES2 True Steam, tested on its normal program. We recently ran a normally soiled load through a steam program for and found this improved the cleaning – its washing performance moved up from 70% to 79%. On the downside, it uses a lot more water and energy, decreasing from scores of 85% to 79% and 73% to 56%, respectively. So while the steam program cleans more effectively, it'll also cost you more in the long run.

USING THE TABLE **Price** Recommended retail, as of September 2012. **Scores** The overall score is made up of washing performance (55%), water efficiency (15%), drying performance (15%) and energy efficiency (15%). **Noise** is measured 1m away and 1m up from the dishwasher, which is placed within cabinetry. The noise level varies depending on kitchen layout, but our reading gives a comparative measure. A difference of 3dB is noticeable to the human ear. **Features** See What to Look For, page 52. **Water connection** **H or C** You can connect the dishwasher to hot or cold water. Connecting to hot water is likely to shorten the cycle time, but you may lose program versatility. You may need a tempering valve to connect to solar hot water, as the inlet temperature generally should not exceed 60°C. **C rec** The manufacturer recommends connecting to a cold tap, and the dishwasher heats the water itself (all dishwashers have a heater). **C only** You can only connect the dishwasher to a cold tap. **Type** **FW** Freestanding, with a worktop (can generally be inbuilt as well). **BI** Built-in – might not have top or side panels; must be enclosed and anchored to prevent it from tipping forward when fully loaded and dish racks are pulled out. **SI** Semi-integrated – a built-in type you can fit a panel to the door under the control fascia to match the rest of your kitchen cupboard doors. **FI** Fully integrated – built-in with the whole front matching your kitchen and the controls inside the door. **Running costs** This is an estimate of how much the dishwasher will cost over 10 years for water and electricity if you wash a full load every day using a normal or auto-sensing cycle, based on 26c per kWh for electricity and $2 per 1000L of water. The largest running cost will be the cost of detergent which can vary significantly, so it's not factored in these calculations. **TABLE NOTES** • Newly tested model. * Where possible, we've listed the white model code and price. Most models are available in other colours, finishes or types – usually at a higher price. Where the model numbers are different, we've listed them below. The colour given for SI models is for the control panel. **SS** Indicates any metallic or metallic-look finish; not all models are actually stainless steel. **na** Not applicable – only has one drawer or basket, or in the case of the Fisher & Paykel Double DishDrawer DD60DCW7, two separate drawers. **(A)** Discontinued, but may still be available in stores. **(B)** Since its release in April 2011, Asko has replaced the auto program with daily, which may have different performance characteristics than auto. **(C)** Has height-adjustable cup racks. **(D)** Cannot be selected by user – wash cycle is chosen by auto-sensing program.

Our research shows very few auto programs or dirt sensor programs actually work

Reliability

Refer to *CHOICE*, April 2012, for results of our latest reliability survey, or go to choice.com.au/appliancereliability

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Will your **normal dinnerware fit into the dishwasher** without crowding or hitting the spray arms? Take a few large dinner plates and tall glasses to the store to check they both fit at the same time. Spin the spray arms to make sure they don't hit anything.

Auto program/dirt sensor programs are designed to optimise the amount of energy, water, time and temperature needed. But our research shows very few actually work.

Easy-to-lift, height-adjustable top basket Almost all top baskets are height adjustable, but if it is an easy-adjust system you can do this without removing the basket. Larger internal tubs, often denoted by XL or XXL in the model number, mean that adjustable baskets may not be required – but they can still improve versatility.

Fold-down/removable plate racks can help when loading pots and awkward items. Fold-down types are easier as they don't need external storage when not in use.

An **anti-flood hose** has an electric cut-off near the water tap connection, which means it stops leaks in the hose, not just in the machine. An anti-flood hose is high-level protection.

Half-load option is a program or option that can save water, time, and energy when washing half a load. With some models, you can focus the wash to one basket – handy for washing a smaller load daily so the dishwasher doesn't get smelly. Models with auto program/dirt sensor should automatically do this, but models with a tick in this column have a specific program or option label as such.

Eco-wash programs mostly save on energy by washing at lower temperatures, and are ideal for use with enzyme-based detergents.

Fast wash or **glasses programs** are suitable for lightly soiled dishes, or if you rinse first (which we don't believe you need to do).

Cutlery trays are good for large utensils, and for grouping cutlery on the tray, making unloading easier (but you can do this with baskets too). They may be safer by reducing the risk of stabs from knives and forks in standard cutlery baskets, but our results show they don't necessarily wash better than a cutlery basket. It's also worth noting that machines with cutlery trays tend to have shorter heights between racks, which may be a problem if you have tall glasses and larger plates – again, always check before buying.

Cutlery basket An anti-nesting grid helps stop the cutlery pieces from nesting, to enable a better wash. For added versatility, look for a cutlery basket that can be placed anywhere in the bottom basket.

The **controls** should be easy to use and the **labelling** intuitive and clear. Look for engraved or etched labels on stainless steel so they don't come off when cleaning. Only use a microfibre cloth or warm, soapy water on bonded labelling. ■

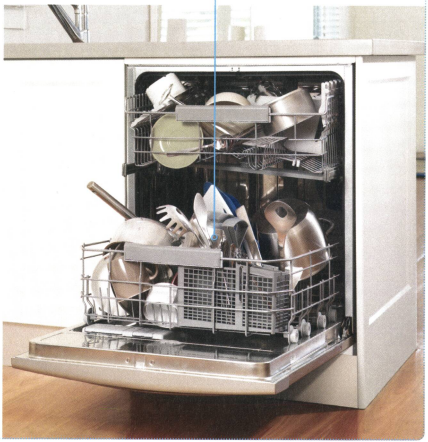

IMAGE: MIELE

Magic moments

What's your best tool for making movie magic? **Denis Gallagher** finds out

The 1980s saw the arrival of the first "compact" video cameras, which were bulky shoulder-mounted devices.

Fast forward to 1995, and the camcorder's popularity was soaring with the release of a compact digital video (MiniDV) camcorder delivering an easier user experience and the ability to transfer video to a PC to edit without further loss of detail.

Today, the camcorder is under threat from smartphones and digital still cameras that deliver surprisingly good HD video performance. But are the results from multi-use devices good enough to abandon the dedicated camcorder?

Camcorders

WHAT TO BUY

79% Sony HDR-PJ760V

$1899

Good points

- Excellent performance in daylight and artificial lighting conditions
- Eyepiece viewfinder is very useful in adverse lighting conditions
- Among the best models we've ever tested for taking still photos
- GPS for geotagging videos and photos
- Includes a pico projector for video projection directly from the camera onto a wall in a dark room
- Largest flash memory (96GB) on test

Bad points

- Only 10x optical zoom

78% Sony HDR-TD20V

$2099

Good points

- Excellent performance in daylight and artificial lighting conditions
- Very good performance when working in low lighting conditions
- Among the best models we've tested for taking still photos
- GPS mode for geotagging videos and photos
- Can shoot 3D video and preview footage without using glasses
- More than three hours' recording time

Bad points

- Only 12x optical zoom

77% Panasonic HC-X900M

$1799

Good points

- Excellent performance in daylight conditions
- Among the best models we've tested for taking still photos in low-light conditions
- Eyepiece viewfinder is very useful in adverse lighting conditions

Bad points

- Can shoot only 75 minutes on a full battery, which is much less than other top-performing models
- Only OK video performance in low-light conditions

IMAGE: ISTOCK PHOTO

71%
Canon Legria HF M52

Good points
- Very good performance in daylight and artificial lighting conditions
- Excellent performance when working in low-light conditions
- Wi-Fi capability allows you to share your video on social media sites directly from the camera without having to connect to a PC

Bad points
- Audio quality not as good as top-performing models
- No remote control

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED
Canon Legria HF G10 (*CHOICE*, Dec 11 / Jan 12)
Sony HDR-PJ260 (*CHOICE*, Jun 12)
Sony HDR-XR260 (*CHOICE*, Jun 12)
Panasonic HC-V700 (*CHOICE*, Jun 12)

HD camcorders

PROS
Camcorders focus on doing one thing well, and all the lenses, menu systems and operations are designed with this task in mind.

Storage or removable memory for video camcorders is easy to access, and 32GB of internal flash memory and/or support for 32GB of removable memory is a standard specification in camcorders.

The audio performance among top-performing camcorders is consistently better than alternatives such as digital still cameras and smartphones. Microphone inputs and headphone connections are features you can expect on a good camcorder, but are often absent on smartphones or digital still cameras.

When your video-taking environment is not ideal and you need to tweak the exposure settings for a dimly lit scene or alter the video shutter speed to capture fast-moving action or even attach a zoom microphone or video lamp, a dedicated camcorder is still the best tool for the job.

CONS
Camcorders are not as versatile as multi-use devices. Even though they have become more affordable, the best-performing models are still expensive devices.

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		PERFORMANCE										FEATURES			
CAMCORDERS	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Daylight score (%)	Artificial light score (%)	Low light score (%)	Autofocus score (%)	Image stabilisation score (%)	Still photo score (%)	Length of operation (minutes)	External battery charger	Remote control	Video lamp / photo flash	SDXC removable memory
• **Sony** HDR-PJ760V	1899	79	62	67	90	90	87	99	80	90	110	✓	✓	✓/✓	✓
• **Sony** HDR-TD20V	2099	78	60	68	90	90	85	99	70	90	220	✓	✓	✓/✓	✓
• **Panasonic** HC-X900M	1799	77	72	75	90	72	60	99	70	90	75	✓	✓	✓/✓	✓
Canon Legria HF G10	1499	74	64	68	75	71	80	99	63	88	113		✓	–/–	✓
Sony HDR-PJ260	899	73	58	75	83	80	55	99	60	90	140		✓	–/–	✓
Sony HDR-XR260	799	73	56	78	83	80	55	99	60	90	105			–/–	✓
Panasonic HC-V700	799	71	72	57	68	68	60	99	70	82	75			✓/✓	✓
• **Canon** Legria HF M52	899	71	62	51	84	84	90	91	65	66	115	✓		–/–	✓
• **Canon** Legria HF R38	549	67	60	56	74	71	65	99	58	64	60	✓		–/–	✓
• **Canon** Legria HF R36	499	67	60	56	74	71	65	99	58	64	60	✓		–/–	✓
Sony HDR-CX190E	399	65	60	61	66	63	56	99	55	72	95			–/–	✓
Sony HDR-PJ200E	499	64	59	61	65	62	55	99	60	62	95			–/–	✓
• **JVC** GZ-E10	399	64	60	75	59	44	60	86	60	na	65	✓		–/–	✓
• **Panasonic** HC-V500M	599	62	71	40	64	68	50	99	48	57	110	✓		✓/✓	✓
• **JVC** GZ-E205	499	61	62	75	59	44	60	86	60	34	65	✓		✓/–	✓
• **Panasonic** HX-DC2	249	59	60	61	63	56	36	69	43	81	50	✓		–/✓	✓
Samsung HMX-QF20	379	59	55	36	59	59	60	96	63	57	105	✓		–/–	✓
• **Panasonic** HC-V100	399	58	67	40	50	50	55	89	58	54	155	✓		–/–	✓
• **Panasonic** HX-WA2	349	57	57	60	63	56	40	69	43	71	65	✓		–/✓	✓
• **Toshiba** Camileo X200	299	51	56	33	55	50	50	64	30	67	79	✓	✓	✓/–	✓
• **Panasonic** HC-V10	299	49	63	41	38	25	35	98	58	20	80	✓		–/–	✓

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail or average selling price, as of September 2012. **Scores** The overall score is made up of ease of use, autofocus (10%), image stabilisation (10%) and still photo (10%). **TABLE NOTES (A)** MS DuoPro. **(B)** MS DuoPro x2. **(C)** 160GB hard disk drive. mini-HDMI cable). All models can record HD video to a removable SD card, although some have an additional option to record to flash memory or an

IMAGE: ISTOCK PHOTO

ABOUT THE REST

For the best of the rest, look to the **Canon Legria HF R38** or **R36** for a good value performer, or the **Sony HDR-PJ200E** with the added ability to project a small video onto a flat, light surface. Panasonic produces camcorders that we would be happy to recommend, however the **Panasonic HC-V10** and **HC-V100** deliver video performance not much better than a good smartphone. The **Panasonic HX-DC2** is an affordable pocket camcorder, with the **HX-WA2** version claiming to be waterproof to three metres. The **Samsung**, **Toshiba** and **JVC** models deliver OK performance and are all under $500, but are starting to pale in comparison to the increasingly impressive performance of the latest batch of smartphones and digital still cameras.

SPECIFICATIONS

Dolby digital / surround sound	Microphone input	Headphone socket	GPS	Wireless (Wi-Fi)	Viewfinder	Optical image stabiliser	AVCHD recording	Touchscreen	Built-in flash memory (GB)	LCD monitor size (mm)	Camera image resolution	Weight (g)	Optical zoom	Contact
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	96	75	24.1	625	10	sony.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	64	87	20.4	554	12	sony.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	32	90	16	490	12	panasonic.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	32	87	2	569	10	canon.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	16	75	8.9	369	30	sony.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	(C)	75	8.9	405	30	sony.com.au
✓/–	✓					✓	✓	✓	–	77	6.1	314	21	panasonic.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	32	72	2.07	363	10	canon.com.au
✓/–		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	32	72	2.07	277	32	canon.com.au
✓/–		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	8	72	2.07	277	32	canon.com.au
✓/–							✓		–	66	5.3	217	25	sony.com.au
✓/–							✓	✓	–	66	5.3	217	25	sony.com.au
✓/–							✓		–	68	2	214	40	jvc.com.au
✓/–						✓	✓	✓	16	77	3	268	38	panasonic.com.au
✓/–							✓	✓	–	78	2	222	40	jvc.com.au
–/–									–	76	14	178	5	panasonic.com.au
–/–				✓		✓		✓	–	68	5.3	211	20	samsung.com.au
✓/–						✓	✓		–	67	2.1	224	34	panasonic.com.au
–/–									–	67	14	260	5	panasonic.com.au
–/–	✓							✓	–	76	8	300	12	toshiba.com.au
–/–						✓	✓		–	67	0.9	235	63	panasonic.com.au

25%), sound quality (15%), daylight picture quality (10%), artificial light picture quality (10%), low light picture quality (10%).
All camcorders on test support USB2 and HDMI output for watching video on a HD TV (although you may need to use a
internal hard disk drive (HDD). Video performance scores for the camcorders are rated against a broadcast quality HD camcorder.

Digital still cameras

A digital still camera is designed to capture still photos, however many of the controls and processes are the same as those required to capture video.

PROS

The best digital still cameras have good-quality lenses that can deal with various lighting conditions, particularly low light.

The viewfinder/monitor is generally the same whether you're composing a video scene or taking a still image.

While not dealing with the much larger demands on storage as HD video, digital still cameras generally have the same SDXC removable memory to store video and, as with a camcorder, it's easy to access the card without having to remove the battery.

The latest generation of digital still cameras also make it easy to view your video on a large-screen TV, with HDMI now a standard connection on new models (mini-HDMI and HDMI cables may be an extra cost).

CONS

Most digital still cameras are poor at capturing audio, regardless of whether they're expensive or not.

During operation, noise is an issue with nearly all compact cameras and most DSLRs due to the lack of dedicated control and microphone input to monitor sound. A smartphone may deal with this issue better than a still camera as there is less chance of you having to deal with motor noise and lens movement.

While most digital still cameras have optical zooms, their operation does not suit video use as well as a camcorder's. A DSLR's manual zoom removes the smooth motion of a motorised zoom, while an automatic zoom on a compact camera often introduces sound disturbances not found with optical zooms on camcorders.

WHAT TO BUY

Digital interchangeable lens cameras

If you own an SLR or a DSLR without video, you may have invested in a couple of quality lenses, which should be ▸

factored into the brand you choose. For example, there is little gained in buying a Nikon if you have three Canon lenses. The **Canon EOS 60D** and **7D** and **Nikon D7000** offer the larger traditional SLR form factor, while the **Nikon 1 V1**, **Sony NEX-7K** and **Olympus E-M5** kits are the latest generation of mirrorless interchangeable lens cameras. They're smaller than average DSLRs, and being able to change lenses allows for greater creative flexibility than compact cameras.

High-end digital compact cameras

These cameras are more compact than a DSLR, but offer many of the exposure features you find in a semi-professional camera. For budget-conscious users who want some control over their creative environment, the **Sony Cyber-shot DSC-RX100** and **Canon G1 X** make good options at well below $1000. The **Canon PowerShot S100** allows users to geotag and upload photos to social networking sites or Google Earth.

Basic

The **Canon Ixus 1100HS** delivers a good performance for still and video capture, with a touchscreen for easy focusing and a good optical zoom to get you close to the action, although you may want to zoom in on the scene before recording. It's also one of the best-value cameras on test.

				PERFORMANCE								FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS				
DIGITAL STILL CAMERAS	**Price ($)**	**Camera type (%)**	**Overall camera score (%)**	**Overall video score (%)**	**Daylight score (%)**	**Low light score (%)**	**Resolution (%)**	**Audio recording (%)**	**Monitor (%)**	**Play/record controls (%)**	**Audio disturbance (%)**	**Swivel monitor**	**Touchscreen**	**Optical viewfinder**	**Hotshoe**	**Mic input**	**GPS tagging**	**Video signal output**	**Image resolution (MP)**	**Optical zoom range**	**Screen size (in)**	**Weight (g)**	**Contact**
Canon EOS 60D	2199	D	71	76	83	87	92	38	63	50	24	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	18	7.5	3	1279	canon.com.au
Sony Cyber-shot DSC-RX100	799	H	63	75	92	88	69	41	67	66	38								20	3.6	2.8	241	sony.com.au
Canon EOS 7D	2999	D	71	72	90	70	85	42	59	60	20			✓	✓	✓		✓	18	7.5	2.8	1425	canon.com.au
Canon G1 X	849	H	61	72	82	97	56	41	75	58	40	✓		✓	✓			✓	14	4	3	565	canon.com.au
Canon PowerShot S100	549	H	59	71	70	79	93	36	62	54	30						✓	✓	12	5	3	195	canon.com.au
Canon Ixus 1100 HS	399	B	70	71	79	63	90	49	63	60	38		✓					✓	12	12	3.2	209	canon.com.au
Nikon 1 V1	1149	D	65	71	95	57	85	38	52	76	26			✓	✓	✓		✓	10	3	2.8	525	nikon.com.au
Nikon D7000	2099	D	72	70	85	83	63	45	65	76	20			✓	✓	✓		✓	16	5.8	2.8	1258	nikon.com.au
Olympus E-M5	1499	D	71	70	81	79	67	42	61	58	60	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	16	4.2	3	711	olympus.com.au
Sony NEX-7K	1699	D	63	70	91	84	57	35	71	66	26	✓		✓	✓	✓			24	3.1	2.9	571	sony.com.au
Panasonic Lumix DMC-GX1X	1199	D	63	69	88	69	68	42	68	74	36		✓		✓			✓	16	3	2.9	440	panasonic.com.au
Canon PowerShot SX40 HS	599	H	69	68	81	77	66	55	57	46	32	✓		✓	✓			✓	12	35	2.6	638	canon.com.au
Canon Ixus 125 HS	299	B	68	67	64	88	71	39	61	62	28							✓	16	5	3	136	canon.com.au
Canon PowerShot G12	799	H	66	67	69	95	45	56	65	44	74	✓		✓	✓			✓	10	5	2.8	425	canon.com.au
Sony Cyber-shot DSC-HX200V	599	H	58	66	91	75	54	35	62	66	28	✓		✓			✓		18	30	3	611	sony.com.au
Sony Alpha 77V	2099	D	64	66	87	81	49	39	65	58	24	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		24	3.1	2.8	1007	sony.com.au
Sony NEX-F3K	699	D	64	62	86	72	54	33	50	62	10	✓			✓				16	3.1	2.9	535	sony.com.au
Olympus Tough TG-1	449	B	57	61	56	76	75	27	60	50	20						✓	✓	12	4	3	237	olympus.com.au
Leica D-Lux-5	899	H	57	60	70	87	43	29	65	66	10				✓			✓	10	3.8	2.9	283	leica.com
Nikon D3200	899	D	68	59	70	66	56	31	65	76	16			✓	✓	✓		✓	24	3.1	2.8	811	nikon.com.au
Leica V-Lux-2	1049	H	54	58	81	36	70	40	63	66	10	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	14	24	2.9	591	leica.com
Canon EOS 650D	1749	D	71	56	67	58	53	40	60	54	30	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	18	3.1	3	834	canon.com.au
Canon PowerShot D20	400	B	64	55	53	56	57	50	57	56	54						✓	✓	12	5	3	238	canon.com.au

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail or average selling price, as of October 2012. **Scores** The overall score is made up of the daylight (25%), low light (25%), resolution (25%), audio recording (10%), monitor (5%), play and record controls (5%) and audio disturbances (5%). All digital still cameras on test support USB2, and have onboard camera flash (except the Nikon 1 V1), inbuilt speaker and face detection. All have the option to switch the image stabiliser on or off and all offer video image stabilisation. All have the ability to zoom in and out during a video shot, except the Canon Powershot G12. All have a HDMI connection, and the Sony models also have additional video display options for older TVs. Video performance scores for the digital still cameras are rated against a consumer HD camcorder with video performance scores focused on its video operation as a digital still camera. **D** = DSLR. **H** = High-end. **B** = Basic.

Smartphones

There are now more mobile phones in Australia than people, and most new smartphones also capture HD video.

PROS

Of all the electronic devices, a mobile is the one you'll most likely have on hand, ready to capture a movie moment.

While the small form factor limits the size of the lens, smartphones have few, if any, moving parts, which means surprisingly good audio performance.

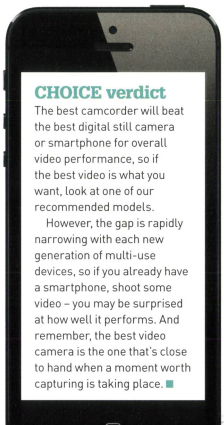
CONS

Smartphones are smart because they can do so many things. However, this versatility comes at a cost when it comes to taking video, as the menu systems and controls aren't designed to do this. The record button is often buried deep within the menu system or the buttons may not exist at all – rather you need to swipe, poke or make some screen selection, often without knowing whether you have paused, stopped or deleted the video.

If the smartphone has a removable memory card (for example, microSD), you will usually have to remove the cover and then the battery to get to it.

WHAT TO BUY

The **Apple iPhone 5** and **4S** have excellent video performance and surprisingly good audio, although the lack of removable memory may be an issue if you don't have immediate access to a PC or the internet to transfer the video. The results on a large-screen TV are also excellent. When we tested the **Nokia N8** earlier this year, we noted it is one of the most accomplished multimedia devices for taking video and still photography – and both observations hold true today. You'll most likely find it at a very good price, as the media did a remarkable job of panning it for not operating like an iPhone or Android phone.



CHOICE verdict

The best camcorder will beat the best digital still camera or smartphone for overall video performance, so if the best video is what you want, look at one of our recommended models.

However, the gap is rapidly narrowing with each new generation of multi-use devices, so if you already have a smartphone, shoot some video – you may be surprised at how well it performs. And remember, the best video camera is the one that's close to hand when a moment worth capturing is taking place. ■

			PERFORMANCE									FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS			
SMARTPHONES	Price ($)	Overall mobile phone score (%)	Overall video score (%)	Video recording (%)	Audio recording (%)	PC monitor viewing (%)	HDTV display (%)	Onboard speaker (%)	Headphone output (%)	Camera versatility (%)	Still image quality (%)	Video zoom function	HDMI connection possible	Camera flash	Second camera at front side	Internal storage capacity (GB)	Display diagonal (in)	Video maximum picture size	Camera resolution (MP)	Contact
Apple iPhone 5	999	77	88	90	88	90	90	80	90	75	83	✓	✓*	✓	✓	64	4	1080p	8	apple.com.au
Apple iPhone 4S	999	77	87	90	88	90	90	80	90	67	76	✓	✓*	✓	✓	64	3.5	1080p	8	apple.com.au
Nokia N8	379	69	75	73	78	70	80	70	80	76	80	✓	✓	✓	✓	16	3.5	720p	12	nokia.com.au
Motorola Razr XT910	399	79	67	70	60	70	70	60	60	75	59	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	4.3	1080p	8	motorola.com.au
Nokia 808 PureView	569	71	67	65	73	70	50	80	50	87	79	✓	✓	✓	✓	16	3.9	1080p	38	nokia.com.au
Samsung Galaxy S III	579	79	66	63	68	60	70	60	70	74	74		✓*	✓	✓	32	4.8	1080p	8	samsung.com.au
Samsung Galaxy Note	519	77	64	70	50	70	70	50	50	74	70		✓*	✓	✓	16	5.3	1080p	8	samsung.com.au
Samsung Galaxy Nexus	379	75	64	63	65	60	70	50	70	63	64	✓	✓*	✓	✓	16	4.6	1080p	5	samsung.com.au
HTC One S	399	73	62	70	48	70	70	40	50	74	47	✓	✓*	✓	✓	16	4.3	1080p	8	htc.com/au
Sony Xperia S	409	72	63	63	63	60	70	40	70	77	66	✓	✓	✓	✓	32	4.3	1080p	12	sony.com.au
Samsung Galaxy Ace 2	269	72	60	63	55	60	70	40	60	64	54		✓*	✓	✓	2.1	3.9	720p	5	samsung.com.au
Sony Xperia P	329	72	59	55	63	50	70	40	70	80	60	✓	✓		✓	16	4	1080p	8	sony.com.au
HTC One X	479	74	58	63	45	60	70	30	50	74	53	✓	✓*	✓	✓	32	4.6	1080p	8	htc.com/au
HTC Sensation XL	379	73	56	55	53	50	70	30	60	72	57	✓	✓*	✓	✓	16	4.6	720p	8	htc.com/au

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail or average selling price, as of September 2012. **Scores** The overall score is made up of video recording (40%), audio recording (20%), PC monitor viewing (10%), HDTV viewing (10%), onboard speaker (5%), headphone output (5%), camera versatility (5%) and still image quality (5%). All smartphones on test support USB2, have onboard camera flash, autofocus and a second camera for video calling. No smartphone on test has optical zoom. Video performance scores for the smartphones are rated against a consumer HD camcorder. *Requires HDMI adapter.

IMAGE: APPLE AND ISTOCKPHOTO

Take control of your TV

Denis Gallagher looks at the best ways to record your favourite shows so you can watch when you want, not when the networks want

While there is an ever-increasing number of "must see" free-to-air TV programs, they're often shown at times or on days that don't suit you. A digital video recorder (DVR) allows you to control your TV viewing environment, recording the shows to watch later.

Most DVRs have two high-definition (HD) TV tuners to record up to two different shows while watching a third program recorded earlier. DVRs deliver features such as the ability to pause live TV, while some allow you to skip through ads for recorded programs.

When it works properly, an electronic program guide (EPG) will allow you to see what programs are coming up in the next hour, day or week so you can simply select the program that you want to record using the remote control and your DVR will do the rest.

For those who like watching DVD or Blu-ray (BD) movies, DVRs are also available with DVD or BD players, while others include BD and DVD recorders, allowing you to transfer the video stored on the DVR hard drive to a recordable DVD or BD. A recordable DVD can store up to 4.7GB, while a recordable BD can hold up to 25GB.

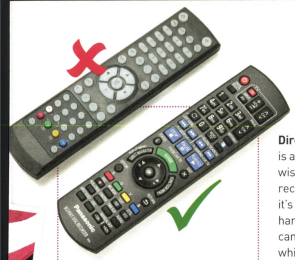
Aside from the Sony, Healing, Bush and Grundig models, the DVRs on test offer various levels of online streaming and networking functionality. Models that support DLNA play video, music and images stored on your home network or over the internet, while other features on offer include the ability to stream recorded programs to your smartphone using a dedicated app.

Nutshell

- A DVR gives you the freedom to watch what you want, when you want.
- Consider a DVR with a DVD/BD player if you also like to watch rented movies, or a DVD/BD recorder if you want to save a favourite program or series to disc.

What about TVs that record?

While many of the latest range of "smart" TVs can record a TV program to a USB device such as a flash or external hard drive, they're not as functional as a dedicated DVR. With only one digital tuner, you have to watch what you're recording, or do something else while it's recording.



Remote controls should have buttons that are sized, shaped and spaced so you can easily find and press them individually. They should be grouped so you can quickly go to specific functions, and the most commonly used buttons should be prominent. All should have clear English labels or obvious symbols.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Direct recording to an external drive is a particularly handy feature if you wish to store any of the shows you have recorded for future viewing. Effectively, it's the same as putting an additional hard drive into your DVR. Some DVRs can record to an external USB device, while other devices only allow you to move content from the hard drive of the DVR to the external drive.

Timer recordings allow you to set your device to record shows past the standard seven days allocated by the EPG – handy if you want to record a special televised event (sport or major occasion) and won't be around during the week it's being aired. All except the Bush, Grundig and Fetch TV unit have this feature.

Auto padding is the ability to automatically append extra time before and after a recording, which is useful when programs don't air on time.

HD video recordings can take from 5GB to 15GB per hour, depending on the type of video shown and the quality selected. An hour of action movie footage with lots of changes in scenery and colour will take up much more space than an hour-long interview in a studio setting with little changes in scene. Most DVR companies indicate an average between the two extremes.

AVCHD is the standard video file output for HD camcorders.

MKV, otherwise known as Matroska, and **DivX** are video formats that are popular on the internet.

WHAT TO BUY

78%
Panasonic DMR-XW390GLK

Good points

- Very good EPG, with ability to see individual channel timelines
- Excellent recording accuracy
- Initial set-up is very straightforward
- Can act as a DLNA server
- Excellent handling of damaged DVDs
- Recordings can be stored and viewed elsewhere via DVD
- Composite video input
- Skip forward is 60 seconds, skip back is 10 seconds (for ad skipping)
- Good recording management

Bad points

- Awkward channel selection controls on remote
- Relatively poor standby energy usage

76%
Humax HDR-7500T

Good points

- Very good recording accuracy
- Timer recording is easy to use
- You can record an entire series, including screenings on other channels
- Our unit came with a USB wireless dongle
- Can act as a DLNA server or client
- Settable skipping duration (for ad skipping)

Bad points

- Can't edit ads out of a recording
- Poor front panel controls

75%
Panasonic DMR-BWT820GL

Good points

- Excellent recording accuracy and handling of damaged DVDs
- Initial set-up is very straightforward
- Can act as a DLNA server or client
- Recordings can be stored and viewed elsewhere via DVD or Blu-ray. They can also be stored and viewed via USB, although the content has to be played on the original device
- Composite video input
- Skip forward is 60 seconds, skip back is 10 seconds (for ad skipping)

Bad points

- Awkward channel selection controls on remote
- Relatively poor standby energy usage

IMAGES: HBO, SHOWTIME, AMC, ABC

75%
Panasonic DMR-HW220GLK

Good points
- Excellent recording accuracy
- Initial set-up is very straightforward
- Good recordings management
- Can act as a DLNA server or client
- Recordings can be stored and viewed via USB, although the content has to be played on the original device.
- Skip forward is 60 seconds, skip back is 10 seconds (for ad skipping)

Bad points
- Awkward channel selection controls on remote
- Relatively poor standby energy usage

75%
Panasonic DMR-PWT520

Good points
- Excellent recording accuracy and handling of damaged DVDs
- Initial set-up is very straightforward
- Very good on-screen display
- Good recordings management
- Includes a Blu-ray player
- Can act as a DLNA server or client
- Recordings can be stored and viewed via USB, although the content has to be played on the original device
- Skip forward is 60 seconds, skip back is 10 seconds (for ad skipping)

Bad points
- Awkward channel selection controls on remote
- Relatively poor standby energy usage

74%
LG HR925T

Good points
- Very good recording accuracy
- Good timer recording ease of use
- Excellent standby energy usage and handling of damaged DVDs
- Includes a Blu-ray player
- Wireless support
- Can act as a DLNA server or client
- Recordings can be stored and viewed via USB, although the content has to be played on the original device

Bad points
- Can't protect recordings or edit ads out of a recording
- Doesn't support the automatic padding of recording start and stop times

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			PERFORMANCE								FEATURES					
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	EPG score (%)	Remote score (%)	Timer accuracy score (%)	Timer recording score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Standby energy consumption score (%)	Annual running cost ($)	Plays AVCHD	Plays .MKV files	Plays DivX	WiFi	DLNA support	Streamin
Panasonic DMR-XW390GLK	499	78	81	76	98	65	77	40	10.40	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Humax HDR-7500T	449	76	79	77	85	75	64	60	10.60			✓	✓(B)	✓	
Panasonic DMR-HW220GLK	449	75	75	76	96	60	75	40	8.20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Panasonic DMR-BWT820GL	999	75	73	76	96	60	76	40	10.20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Panasonic DMR-PWT520	499	75	75	76	96	60	77	40	8.70	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
LG HR925T	499	74	59	84	85	75	58	100	9.70	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Strong SRT 7000	399	68	78	77	66	60	53	0	42.70				✓		✓
Sony SVR-HDT1000	479	67	73	71	72	70	57	0	32.60			✓			
Bush BVR501FV	349	66	69	73	92	0	58	80	8.00						
FetchTV YX-6936U	(A)	66	89	71	80	0	55	0	40.90						
Samsung BD-E8900A	599	66	63	70	61	70	63	80	12.10	✓	✓	✓	✓(B)	✓	✓
Samsung BD-E8500A	499	66	63	70	61	70	63	80	11.90	✓	✓	✓	✓(B)	✓	✓
TiVO TCD663000	699	66	70	64	76	88	53	0	59.10				✓(B)		
Topfield TRF7170	449	65	73	54	87	80	56	0	26.20		✓	✓	✓(B)		
Grundig GDVR1TBFV	449	64	69	64	92	0	58	80	8.30						
Healing HHR787	279	63	52	61	83	70	52	80	6.90						
Teac HRD3500T	399	59	60	66	67	60	53	0	29.70						

IMAGES: HBO, AMC

ABOUT THE REST

Neither the **TiVO** nor **FetchTV** make our recommended list. The TiVO's dated remote control, lack of timer recording for the FetchTV and the high running costs for both hurt their overall scores. Neither unit is as easy to set up initially as our top-performing models nor can they delete ads or divide recorded programs. However, these devices do include interesting features such as educated guesses about what you'd like to watch based on chosen preferences and past viewing patterns. The FetchTV also offers more online features and functionality than the other DVRs on test, delivering a TV experience somewhere between a standard DVR and a subscription-based service such as Foxtel. However, the unit is linked to the ISP providing your broadband service so you need to be with the right ISP to use the device.

The **Samsung BD-E8900A** and **BD-E8500A** DVRs with BD players are similar in features and functionality to the **Panasonic DMR-PWT520** and **LG**, yet don't perform as accurately when recording overlapping shows and lack ad-skipping and auto-padding abilities.

Of the DVR models without an optical media drive, the **Sony** and **Strong** models have a good EPG and remote, yet are among the most expensive to run. The **Bush** and **Grundig** models have a very similar EPG and menu system, although our tester found the Grundig remote is not as user-friendly, and neither model has a timer recording ability.

The worst EPG on test is the **Healing** DVR, while the remote on the **Topfield** is the worst by a significant margin. The Topfield also has wildly variable tuner performance results, with our tester finding less than half the stations on offer (although all stations were eventually captured on another outlet). ■

DVD region codes

Of the Blu-ray/DVD recorders in the current test, apart from the Australian DVD region 4 coding, all the Panasonic models with optical drives support DVDs using the region codes of 2, 3, 5 and 6. Meanwhile, the two Samsung models support DVDs using region 2 and 3. The USA uses region code 1 for its DVDs, while the UK and much of Europe and Japan use DVD region code 2. China uses region code 6, while region code 3 is used in South East Asia.

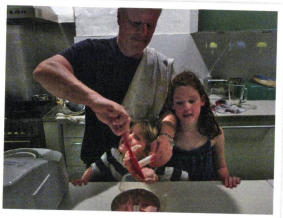
USING THE TABLE All models on test support two simultaneous recordings, time-shifting and variable speed fast-forward and review. All models with an optical disc player score 100% for dealing with a damaged DVD except the Samsungs, which scored poorly. All but the Healing have a LAN connection. The Sony, Bush, and Grundig have a LAN connection for firmware upgrades and system maintenance only. **Price** Recommended retail, as of September 2012. **Scores** The overall score is made up of EPG (30%), remote control (30%), timer accuracy (15%), timer recording score (10%), ease of use (10%) and standby energy (5%). Standby energy score measures how much energy the DVR uses when in standby mode. Annual running cost is calculated as a running cost based on five hours of use and 19 hours of standby power (at 26/kWh) per day. **TABLE NOTES (A)** Depends on ISP. **(B)** USB dongle is available for wireless and was included in our test model. **(C)** For service use or software updates only. **(D)** Skip interval is fixed at 10 minutes. **(E)** Skip interval is fixed at five minutes. **(F)** When resuming normal speed after fast forwarding the TiVO skips back a short time, so you don't miss any of the program. **ns** Not specified.

SPECIFICATIONS

USB port	USB recording to external drive	USB copying	Ad skipping	Auto padding	Freeview EPG	Dimensions (cm; H x W x D)	Weight (kg)	Hard disk capacity (GB)	Optical drive	Claimed recording hours (SD / HD)	Contact
1		✓	✓	✓		6.5 x 43 x 25	3.2	500	DVD recorder	131 / 69	panasonic.com.au
2			✓	✓		6.5 x 38 x 26.5	2.7	500		ns / ns	humaxdigital.com/au
2		✓	✓	✓		6.5 x 43 x 25.5	2.4	1000		264 / 140	panasonic.com.au
2	✓	✓	✓	✓		6.5 x 43 x25.5	2.9	1000	BD recorder	264 / 140	panasonic.com.au
2		✓	✓	✓		6 x 43 x 25.5	2.8	500	BD player	131 / 69	panasonic.com.au
2	✓	✓				6 x 43 x 31	3.2	500	BD player	ns / ns	lg.com.au
2	✓	✓	✓	✓		7 x 33.5 x 27.5	2.6	500		250 / 60	strong.com.au
2		✓				5.5 x 32 x 23	2.1	1000		ns / ns	sony.com.au
1 (C)			✓(D)		✓	5.5 x 30 x 27.5	1.6	500		ns / ns	bushaustralia.com.au
2			✓(E)	✓		7 x 35 x 27.5	2.4	1000		585 / ns	fetchtv.com.au
2	✓	✓				6 x 43 x 31	3.2	1000	BD player	600 / 250	samsung.com.au
2	✓	✓				6 x 43 x 31	3.2	500	BD player	300 / 125	samsung.com.au
2	✓	✓	✓(F)	✓	✓	8.5 x 42 x 32.5	4.1	1000		350 / 150	mytivo.com.au
2	✓	✓	✓	✓		7 x 43 x 28	3.3	1000		ns / ns	topfield.com.au
1 (C)			✓(D)		✓	5.5 x 30 x 27	1.7	1000		ns / ns	grundig.net.au
1	✓	✓	✓	✓		5.5 x 34 x 25	2	500		ns / ns	healingdigital.com
2	✓	✓	✓	✓		7 x 36 x 27	2.2	500		ns / ns	teac.com.au

What's the scoop?

CHOICE member **John Eleftheriou** and his family put four ice-cream makers to the test



Home testers John, Alexandra (7) and Zachary (5) Eleftheriou get ready to try out the ice-cream makers.

Warmer weather signals ice-cream time. So we asked CHOICE member John Eleftheriou and his family to home-test ice-cream makers from Cuisinart, Breville, Sunbeam and DeLonghi, rating them on ease of use, instructions, controls and cleaning.

John found the Cuisinart excellent for ease of use, saying "assembly is intuitive and doesn't require instructions because there aren't many parts". The basic on/off controls were a no-brainer, the appliance wasn't too heavy and, except for the freezing bowl that isn't dishwasher-safe, the bowl, paddle and lid were easy to wash.

John rated the Breville as very good for ease of use. "The instructions are well laid out with a handy tips section, the LCD display is very helpful, the timer is excellent, the flip lid is very useful when adding ingredients, the bowl and paddle only need a rinse and the stainless unit is easy to wipe down," John said. However, the hefty size and weight of the unit, plus the counterintuitive colour coding of the lights (green = off and red = on, except for the power button, which is green when on) count against this model.

The Sunbeam proved that cheap is not always cheerful. John rated this "plasticky"-feeling machine's ease of use as borderline, saying "the instructions tell you to pour the mixture through a very small hole in the lid, which is impossible to do without getting most of it on the outside of the unit and benchtop." Operating the machine was OK, but the final product was deemed inedible by the kids. Cleaning the Sunbeam was mostly pain-free, but the freezer bowl isn't dishwasher-safe.

John and the kids whip up a cold treat at home

The DeLonghi was the most expensive ice-cream maker on test, yet was least favoured by John. His long list of complaints starts with its poor ease of use. When it came to making what was a very sweet and lumpy ice-cream, "some guesswork is required. There's no timer on the unit, and the instructions state it takes 40 minutes to make ice-cream, while the recipe says 25 minutes. Warnings in the book also state that if the ice-cream gets too stiff, it will result in serious damage to the motor and unit. I had to check it every few minutes to make sure it wasn't too stiff!"

John was also unimpressed with the DeLonghi's instructions, which were difficult to locate and hard to read. The pictograms on the controls were hard to decipher and he struggled to find answers in the instruction book. The plastic facade looks cheap and dated, and when it came time to operate the extremely heavy unit, John said you'd "need to be Superman to close the lid" and "have to shout to be heard above the motor". The DeLonghi's one redeeming quality is it only requires a quick rinse to clean. **RESHMA PRASAD**

John's verdict

John said he would buy the ***Cuisinart*** *and* ***Breville****, but would only use either once a month at most. He also thought that because the Cuisinart bowl needs 24 hours to cool, it wasn't something you could do spur of the moment; and felt the 1L capacity of the Breville was insufficient for a large family. John was not prepared to part with his money for the* ***Sunbeam*** *or* ***DeLonghi****.*

Cuisinart Ice Cream Maker ICE-21YA, $119, cuisinart.com.au

Sunbeam Ice Cream Maker GL5550, $39.95, sunbeam.com.au

Breville Ice Cream Maker BCI600, $400, breville.com.au

DeLonghi Il Gelataio ICK5000, $500, delonghi.com

A cut above

Matthew Steen reports on a new mower that performs a lot better than it looks

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Nutshell

- We recommend one of the 16 newly tested lawnmowers, which join our previously tested models to make 29.
- The turf farm where we tested these mowers ended up keeping the best overall performer.

When *CHOICE* first pulled the Makita PLM4614P lawnmower out of its box, we were, frankly, underwhelmed. It was the first Makita we'd come across in 12 rounds of testing and its vivid aqua colour prompted our tester to comment that it looks like a toy.

Fast forward to completing the test, however, and we were so impressed by this "toy's" performance that it ended up topping our recommended list (page 65). The owner of the turf farm in Far North Queensland where we do our testing ended up keeping the Makita.

Also on test is the Masport S18, the first mulcher-only model we've seen in 12 tests. This lawnmower isn't suitable for cutting long grass, such as the type you see after coming back from a long holiday. However, it's excellent for cutting short- and medium-length grass on a regular basis.

We've kept the Ryobi battery mower from our last test (*CHOICE*, November 2011). It's the only one of this kind on test, but we plan on including more mowers of this type in our next test, given it performs so well (see page 64).

Reliability

In our March 2011 reliability survey, members favoured Honda and Flymo mowers.

Brand loyalty Honda and John Deere owners are most likely to buy those brands again at 96% and 94%, respectively.

Lawnmower problems 37% reported the engine failed to start, while 11% said the cord didn't start the motor.

PERCENTAGE WITH NO PROBLEMS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS*

* The number in brackets is the number of responses received for that brand. Figures adjusted for age of mower. Differences of six per cent are significant.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Catcher A good catcher has two handles – one on top for carrying, and one on the back for easy emptying.

The **handle** should be comfortable to hold and preferably height adjustable. A turned-up handle is easier on your wrists and gives you better control over the mower.

The **engine control lever** should be on the handlebar and easy to operate.

The **starter cord** should be easy to pull. It's generally easier to operate when it's on the engine, but a cord mounted halfway up the handle is good if you can't easily bend over.

Cutting positions Look for a large number spread over a useful range of cutting heights. Make sure the cutting height is easily adjustable.

A **mulching adapter** or **plug** should be easy to fit and remove (if the mower has one).

Manoeuvrability The mower should be easy to push and manoeuvre in all conditions. Big wheels improve handling on rough ground and a lightweight model is easier to push and turn.

Cleaning A wash port or nozzle on top of the housing makes it easy to clean underneath the mower, including the blades.

Maintenance Can you easily change the oil, air filter and spark plugs?

HOW WE TEST

Our tester, Peter Horvath, tests the mowers at Tropical Lawns, a turf farm in Cairns. The consistent climate provides plenty of grass to cut year-round. All mowers are weighed and their cutting height range assessed. He checks how closely each model can cut along a vertical wall at the front and sides.

Cutting grass He tests the lawnmowers for their ability to cut short- and medium-length grass with a catcher, and long grass without a catcher.

Mulching For those with a mulching mode, he cuts short- and medium-length grass and assesses the appearance of the lawn afterwards.

Ease of use Peter rates the mowers for vibration through the handle bar, ease of pushing and manoeuvring, handle comfort, convenience of controls, ease of adjusting the cutting height, catcher convenience and ease of starting.

Noise is measured at 7.5m and at the operator's ear level.

Safety He also carries out safety tests, which include measuring blade stopping time and a foot probe safety test. ■

		PERFORMANCE		
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Cutting score – catcher (%)	Cutting score – mulcher (%)
CATCHER & MULCHER				
• **Makita** PLM4614P	523	86	95	100
AL-KO Silver Premium 470BRV	599	85	98	100
Ryobi Cordless Lawn Mower RLM36	499	85	88	95
Victa Corvette 650 GMS486	659	85	98	100
Masport President 4000ST Combo 579937	729	84	98	100
• **Rover** Regal SP Mulch N Catch 12A-E1LB333	618	84	92	95
• **Victa** Commando CMS485	689	84	98	100
Victa Mustang MCA485	739	84	98	100
• **Victa** Mustang MCA486	719	84	98	100
• **AL-KO** Silver 470B	499	83	98	100
SupaSwift Lawn Range Blue	439	83	95	100
Masport President 2000 Combo 567817	649	82	98	100
Toro Recycler 20323	696	82	98	100
• **Honda** HRU197M1 Bull	979	81	98	100
Honda HRU19M1PKUA	839	80	98	100
• **Parklander** PCM4050	399	80	92	95
• **Masport** MSV 4n1 Genius 567826	879	79	98	100
• **Rover** Challenger Mulch N Catch 11A-H1LE333	433	76	92	95
Honda HRU196M1PBUH	1039	70	98	100
• **McCulloch** Mulch or Catch M48A	599	62	92	75
CATCHER ONLY				
Victa Bronco BRA484	599	85	98	na
• **Victa** Lawnkeeper LCS464	359	84	98	na
• **Victa** Vantage VCS464	349	84	98	na
• **Morrison** Rocket 569840	399	82	92	na
• **Honda** HRU19K1 Buck	799	81	98	na
• **Scott Bonnar** Greenkeeper 11A-I0LK373	330	79	92	na
Sanli Power Cut 460 PCS400	349	79	95	na
Pope Aurora 101PM450	246	77	93	na
MULCHER ONLY				
• **Masport** S18 Mulcher AL 567935	649	82	na	93

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended or average retail, as of August 2012. **Scores Catcher & mulcher** of ease of use (50%) and cutting – catcher (50%). **Mulcher only** The overall score is made up of ease of use (5 & Stratton (a popular mower motor brand). Note: All petrol mowers are four stroke and use unleaded petrol. Th

Go to **choice.com.au/lawnmowers** for profiles, and to compare all lawnmowers on test

SPECIFICATIONS

position (dB)	Type	Motor	Deck	Starter toggle location	Cutting positions	Cutting height range (mm, measured)	Width of cut (cm, measured)	Closeness of cut to a vertical edge (mm, front / right / left)	Weight (kg)	Contact
/82	C / M / P	B&S	Steel	Handle	5	30-75	46	125/40/20	27	makita.com.au
/82	C / M / S	B&S	Steel	Motor	7	30-70	46	135/40/18	37	alko.com.au
/80	C / M / P	Battery	Plastic	Handle	5	16-65	40	135/32/32	18	ryobi.com.au
/86	C / M / P	B&S	Alloy	Motor	10	15-70	48	115/18/18	28	victa.com.au
/90	C / M / P	B&S	Steel	Handle	11	3-66	48	120/12/15	28	masport.com.au
/87	C / M / S	Rover	Alloy	Handle	12	13-60	50	140/20/20	34	rovermowers.com.au
/84	C / M / P	Honda	Steel	Motor	10	12-65	48	115/18/18	28	victa.com.au
/91	C / M / P	Honda	Alloy	Motor	10	15-70	48	115/18/18	28	victa.com.au
/86	C / M / P	B&S	Alloy	Motor	10	10-65	48	110/15/15	29	victa.com.au
/83	C / M / P	B&S	Steel	Handle	7	30-70	46	130/45/20	29	alko.com.au
/83	C / M / P	Kohler	Steel	Handle	10	17-58	45	110/18/18	30	allpower.com.au
/88	C / M / P	B&S	Alloy	Handle	10	10-88	46	130/35/22	26	masport.com.au
/85	C / M / P	Toro	Steel	Handle	7	25-105	50	155/18/18	29	toro.com.au
/82	C / M / P	Honda	Alloy	Handle	11	15-70	47	140/18/18	34	hondampe.com.au
/85	C / M / P	Honda	Alloy	Handle	11	12-70	47	135/15/15	33	hondampe.com.au
/87	C / M / P	B&S	Steel	Handle	10	15-85	45	115/35/25	26	parklands.net
/86	C / M / P	B&S	Alloy	Handle	11	10-75	48	125/15/15	32	masport.com.au
/88	C / M / P	Rover	Steel	Handle	10	20-70	50	150/18/18	32	rovermowers.com.au
/83	C / M / P	Honda	Alloy	Handle	11	12-70	47	135/15/15	43	hondampe.com.au
0/83	C / M / P	McCulloch	Alloy	Handle	12	25-65	48	120/35/30	37	mcculloch.com/au
2/87	C / P	B&S	Alloy	Motor	10	15-70	48	115/18/18	28	victa.com.au
0/84	C / P	B&S	Steel	Motor	11	8-70	46	120/35/12	24	victa.com.au
9/83	C / P	B&S	Steel	Motor	13	12-70	46	120/38/12	24	victa.com.au
2/86	C / P	B&S	Steel	Motor	10	15-75	46	110/40/15	22	masport.com.au
0/84	C / P	Honda	Alloy	Handle	11	15-70	47	140/18/18	33	hondampe.com.au
0/85	C / P	Rover	Steel	Handle	7	10-78	46	125/25/20	32	mitre10.com.au
2/86	C / P	Sanli	Steel	Motor	10	10-65	46	125/40/23	31	sanli.com.au
0/86	C / P	B&S	Steel	Motor	6	12-80	44	155/35/35	27	toro.com.au
8/80	M / P	B&S	Alloy	Motor	10	10-78	46	140/38/15	27	masport.com.au

he overall score is made up of cutting – catcher (25%), cutting – mulcher (25%) and ease of use (50%). **Catcher only** The overall score is made up nd cutting – mulcher (50%). **TABLE NOTES** • Newly tested model. **na** Not applicable. **C** Catcher. **M** Mulcher. **P** Push. **S** Self-propelled. **B&S** Briggs yobi has a 36V battery.

WHAT TO BUY

We recommend models that score 85% or above overall and at least 70% for ease of use. For profiles of all the models on test, log on to **choice.com.au/lawnmowers**.

CATCHER & MULCHER

86%
Makita PLM4614P

Good points

- Excellent height-adjustable handle with comfortable rubber grip
- Starter cord is fairly easy to pull
- Easy to convert from catcher to mulcher mode

Bad points

- Cutting height requires a fair amount of effort to adjust
- Catcher lets dust and small grass clippings through the holes on both sides
- The control lever is a little stiff to operate

PREVIOUSLY RECOMMENDED

(All in *CHOICE*, Nov 2011)

CATCHER & MULCHER

AL-KO Silver Premium 470BRV (Petrol) $599

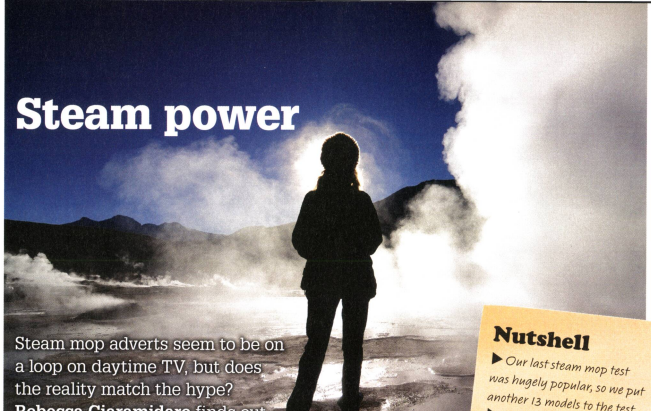
Ryobi Cordless Lawn Mower RLM36 (Battery) $499

Victa Corvette 650 GMS486 (Petrol) $659

CATCHER ONLY

Victa Bronco BRA484 (Petrol) $599

Steam power



Steam mop adverts seem to be on a loop on daytime TV, but does the reality match the hype? **Rebecca Ciaramidaro** finds out

Nutshell

- Our last steam mop test was hugely popular, so we put another 13 models to the test.
- All are impressive at cleaning hard floors, which is their primary purpose.

Because they're one of the most viewed products on **choice.com.au** and one of the most requested tests from members, we thought it was high time we looked again at the latest steam mops.

Our tester, Peter Horvath, applied six different household substances – mustard, coffee, red wine, soy sauce, tomato sauce and black shoe polish – to a vinyl floor in a set pattern and let them dry overnight. He removed any excess with a wet sponge, leaving behind only the dried residue for the steam mops to tackle.

All models on test are OK for removing stains. Stain removal success can depend on the flooring you have – some stains will soak more easily into some types of floors than others, as we discovered. Previously we based the performance score purely on stain removal, but we've since included a general cleaning test so results here aren't comparable with previously tested models.

Although these are good products overall, we found a cheap mop, hot tap water and detergent can get the job done just as well.

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		PERFORMANCE				FEATURES			
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Hard floor cleaning score (%)	Stain cleaning score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Type	Carpet glider	Telescopic wand	Removable water tank
Monster EZ1	249	78	90	63	69	Stick	✓	✓	
Shark S3501NZ	250	76	80	65	75	Stick	✓	✓	
Kenwood Ariete Steam Mop SC4160	149	75	80	62	76	Stick	✓		✓
Home Hero Steam Mop BS290 (12100065)	49	74	80	57	74	Stick	✓		
Karcher SC3.000	299	74	80	60	73	Canister			
Piranha Steam Mop 900121 JJB-603	50	74	80	58	75	Stick		✓	
Vax Steam Hard Floor Master VSTM1500	149	74	80	60	74	Stick	✓		✓
Airflo Easy Steam AFS102	99	72	80	57	68	Stick	✓		✓
Bissell Healthy Home Steam Mop Max 1957-F	259	72	80	55	70	Stick	✓		✓
Hoover Enhanced Clean Disinfecting Steam Mop HSTM1500	279	72	80	58	68	Stick	✓		✓
Aqua Lazer Steam Mop ALM_R	99	71	80	55	68	Stick	✓		✓
Thane H2O Mop X5 (A)	148	71	80	55	68	Stick	✓		
OptimPlus Steam Clean SC263 (12100069)	129	71	80	60	64	Stick	✓		✓

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail, as of September 2012. **Scores** The overall score is made up of hard floor cleaning Look For, opposite. **TABLE NOTES (A)** From Danoz Direct. **(B)** Clear tank.

What they don't do

While steam mops are suitable for most hard floors, including vinyl, ceramic tiles, lino, marble and sealed timber, they can damage the surfaces of cork tiles or unsealed/waxed timber. Most claim to rejuvenate carpet and upholstery, and while they do refresh the carpet's appearance, they don't actually clean it. And since they don't have suction power like vacuums, you'll still need a conventional mop to clean up big spills.

ADDED EXTRAS

The **Karcher** (the only canister model on test) and **Thane** (from Danoz Direct) come with extra attachments such as a hand-held tool and jet nozzle, so we subjected them to extra testing. Using these tools the Karcher cleans shower glass, walls and floors well and is slightly better at these tasks than the Thane, so if you're after a steam mop with these extra attachments the Karcher is worth considering. The Thane even works as a garment steamer, though we found it produces too much steam for this task, leaving garments wet. Most of the steam mops left very little residual water except the Thane, **Hoover** and **Kenwood**, which left a fair bit of water behind on the floor.

IMAGE: ISTOCK PHOTO

					SPECIFICATIONS					
Refill on-the-go	Steam-ready indicator	Steam-on lock switch	Steam-off safety lock	Water-low indicator	Weight (kg)	Reach (m)	Measured wattage (W)	Heat up time (min:sec)	Time in use (min)	Contact
	✓	✓			2.8	7.0	1200	3:30	13	euroflex.com.au
✓				(B)	2.9	9.6	1490	0:30	30	harveynorman.com.au
✓		✓		(B)	3.2	5.5	1500	0:30	13	kenwoodworld.com
✓					1.8	4.3	1310	0:30	15	godfreys.com.au
	✓		✓		4.6	8.3	1500	6:00	18	karcher.com.au
		✓		✓	2.7	5.3	800	2:30	10	hegroup.com.au
✓	✓	✓		(B)	3.4	8.6	1340	0:30	13	vax.com.au
✓		✓		(B)	2.8	5.2	1420	0:20	26	airflo.com.au
✓	✓			(B)	3.7	6.0	1430	0:30	12	bissell.com.au
✓	✓			(B)	3.5	8.6	1340	0:30	13	godfreys.com.au
✓		✓		(B)	3.2	7.2	1440	0:20	28	1800 933 933
✓	✓	✓		(B)	2.4	6.4	1250	0:20	7	danozdirect.com.au
✓	✓			(B)	3.0	6.6	1370	0:30	17	godfreys.com.au

formance (50%), stain cleaning performance (20%) and ease of use (30%). **Features** See What to

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

A **removable water tank** can be refilled while cleaning without having to turn it off first or let it cool down. The Monster requires five minutes cooling time before you can refill, while the Karcher and Piranha require the pressure to be released first. The capacity of the water tanks range from 300mL to 1L.

Cleaning pads are usually microfibre to trap and carry away the dirt. Most come with more than one pad, which is handy for swapping over during a long cleaning job, or if one is in the wash when you want to do some steam-cleaning. Clean the cloth after each use.

Carpet glider attachment allows you to use the mop on carpet. It's handy for refreshing carpet, but for heavy soiling or stains you'll need a heavy-duty steam cleaner (or some carpet shampoo).

A **pad rest** lets you safely stand the mop during a cleaning job. Without one you shouldn't leave the mop standing (while on) in one place for too long. The build-up of heat and steam could damage the floor.

A **telescopic wand** lets you adjust the wand to suit your height.

The **power cord** should allow good reach from the power point.

Accessory tools such as a hand-held tool, jet nozzle or brush allow you to clean grout, shower cubicles and other areas.

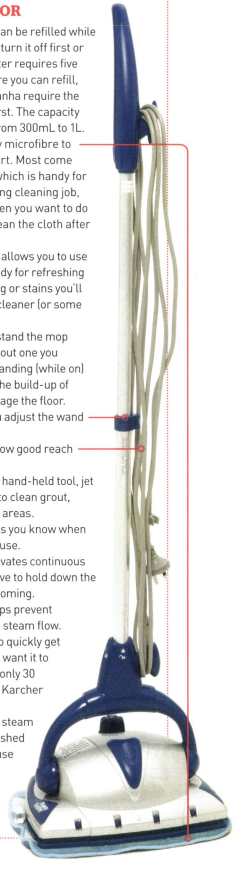
Steam-ready indicator lets you know when the steam mop is ready to use.

Steam-on lock switch activates continuous steam flow so you don't have to hold down the button to keep the steam coming.

Steam-off lock switch helps prevent accidentally turning on the steam flow.

Heat-up time If you want to quickly get your steam mop out, you'll want it to heat up quickly. Most take only 30 seconds to heat up but the Karcher takes six minutes.

Time in use You want your steam mop to last until you've finished all your cleaning. Time in use ranges from only seven minutes for the Thane to 30 minutes for the Shark. ▸



WHAT TO BUY

All the mops on test do their main job – cleaning hard floors – well, so all are recommended. Look for price, features and specs you want when making your decision. Here we single out some honorable mentions. See **choice.com.au/steammops** for more.

78%
Monster EZ1

$249

Best overall

Good points
- Telescopic wand
- Steam-on lock switch
- Steam burst releases extra steam at the front of the mop to help remove difficult stains

Bad points
- Can't be refilled on-the-go – you have to let it cool down slightly first
- The water tank is not particularly easy to fill up
- A little tiring to move mop head on the floor

76%
Shark S3501NZ

$250

Stain cleaning and ease of use

Good points
- Telescopic wand
- Can be refilled on-the-go without letting it cool down
- Long reach from the power point
- Long in-use time
- Easy to move the mop head on the floor

Bad points
- Water tank isn't very easy to fill up

75%
Kenwood Ariete Steam Mop SC4160

$149

Stain cleaning and ease of use

Good points
- Can be refilled on-the-go without letting it cool down
- Steam-on lock switch
- Very easy to fill up the water tank and move the mop head on the floor

Bad points
- Short reach from the power point
- Leaves a fair bit of residual water on the floor after cleaning

74%
Home Hero Steam Mop BS290

$49

Best Buy

Good points
- Can be refilled on-the-go without letting it cool down
- Easy to move the mop head on the floor

Bad points
- Short reach from the power point
- Water tank isn't very easy to fill up

74%
Karcher SC3.000

$299

Canister and attachments

Good points
- Comes with hand and jet nozzles and small brush to clean surfaces such as bathroom tiles
- Steam-off safety lock switch
- Long reach from the power point
- Easy to move the mop head on the floor

Bad points
- Can't be refilled on-the-go – you have to let it cool down slightly first
- Long heat-up time
- The water tank isn't very easy to fill up

74%
Piranha Steam Mop 900121 JJB-603

$50

Best Buy

Good points
- Telescopic wand
- Steam on lock switch
- Easy to move the mop head on the floor

Bad points
- Can't be refilled on-the-go – you have to let it cool down slightly first
- Only 10-minute running time before refill needed
- Short reach from the power point
- Water tank isn't very easy to fill up ■

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THE PEOPLE'S WATCHDOG

CHXMAS2012

Charged up

Denis Gallagher finds the right chargers for your old and new rechargeable batteries

As we explained in *CHOICE*, October 2012 (page 68), rechargeable batteries make good economic sense and are good for the environment. But getting the highest performance from rechargeable batteries can depend on how kind the charger is to the battery.

Some battery chargers use a timer to guess how long an empty battery will take to fully charge. The charger then either turns off or continues to trickle charge (see opposite).

While this is preferable to giving a full charge to a battery regardless of how long the charger is on, there is no recognition of the capacity of the battery or its condition. For example, if a battery with a 2100mAh capacity is half charged, much of the time spent in the charger will expose the battery to unnecessary current.

Similarly, timer chargers may be making calculations based on a lower-capacity battery (2100mAh) and not providing a full charge to the latest range of higher-capacity (2700mAh) batteries, which means the charger will automatically stop charging at a certain time even though the battery can take more charge.

A "smart" charger such as the Energizer, Sanyo or Powerex monitors the battery parameters such as temperature, voltage and state of charge. This information is used by the charger to determine when to terminate the charge, resulting in an optimal charge with less stress on the battery.

Nutshell

- *A charger that takes less time to charge your batteries may be doing them more harm than good.*
- *The power consumed by a battery charger is minimal.*

WHAT TO BUY

72%
Powerex MH-C9000

Good points

- LCD displays capacity, voltage, time elapsed and current
- Options to break in batteries before use or refresh old batteries by discharging at an optimal rate
- Independent operation of each slot, allowing you to charge or discharge each battery
- Second-lowest average temperature for batteries charged, as well as lowest peak temperature
- Spacing between each charging well significantly wider than the other models on test, making it easier to install and extract each battery

Bad points

- Unless you can take advantage of the features on offer, you may baulk at paying double the price of the Sanyo Eneloop charger

			PERFORMANCE								FEATURES	
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Peak temperature during charge score (%)	Average temperature during charge score (%)	Capacity after charge (mAh)	Mains current drawn while charging (mA)	Charge time – default (h:min)[1]	Charge time – fast charge (h:min)	Charge time – slow charge (h:min)	Trickle charging	Smart charging
Powerex MH-C9000	80	72	75	68	1968	0.16	2:00	1:00	3:00	✓	✓
Sanyo Eneloop C-MQR06W	40	71	72	69	1945	0.15	3:42	1:12 (A)	1:48 (B)	✓	✓
Duracell CEF14AU	29	65	65	66	2055	0.15	6:30				
Energizer CH1HR2	70	60	58	63	2025	0.2	0:54			✓	✓
Eveready EVVC2	25	59	55	65	2024	0.15	8:06				

71%
Sanyo Eneloop MC-MQR06W

Good points

- Charge from one to four AA or AAA batteries, with quicker charge times when you choose fewer batteries
- Quick charger with overload timer protection switching off after 4.5 hours
- Lowest average temperature during a charging cycle and second lowest peak temperature
- Includes four Eneloop ready-to-use rechargeable batteries

Bad points

- All-in-one design takes up more than one socket on a standard power point

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Milliampere hour (mAh) is a measurement of the capacity of a battery – the higher the mAh, the longer the battery will last.
Trickle charging is a low-rate charge used to replenish capacity lost due to self discharge. It can help extend the useable life of the battery because it's not working too hard.
A timer charger assumes the batteries are empty when you put them in and will charge them for a set amount of time. However, unlike a smart charger, it can't tell if batteries are empty, full or in between.
Low self-discharge (LSD) Self-discharge is an issue for infrequently used or low-drain devices, such as an emergency torch or a smoke alarm, as the battery will go flat over time faster than non-rechargeable batteries. LSD or "ready to use" (see *CHOICE*, October 2012) batteries are less prone to this effect than non-LSD rechargeable batteries.
Cell spacing, measured from the middle of one cell to another, shows the amount of room available to extract each battery from the charger.
Charging indicators show when the charger thinks the battery is ready for use. An indicator for each cell provides data on the health of each battery, while the Powerex also offers information on current, temperature and capacity for each battery.

ABOUT THE REST

1c
The typical cost to charge a set of batteries

The **Energizer** charged our batteries in the shortest time, but there is only one charging choice and the peak temperature was higher than all but one of the models on test. However, as with most of the others, it will cost you less than 1c to charge and has smart charging protection to help extend the life of your battery.

While the **Duracell** and **Eveready** models are the least expensive, waiting between 6.5 and nine hours when you want to use your latest gadget or toy may be too long for many users. ■

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SPECIFICATIONS

power adapter	Number of cells	Cell spacing (mm)	Weight (g, including power adapter)	Claimed charge time (h)	Minimum number of batteries to charge	Charge indicators	Operating voltage (V)	Stated input power / current	Output (AA)	Output (AAA)	Battery type supported	Batteries supplied with unit	Contact
	4	25	501	ns	1	4 (C)	100-240VAC	0.2A - 2A	Selectable	Selectable	NiMH or NiCD	–	protog.com.au
	4	15	116	3.7 for 4 x 2000mAh	1	4	100-240VAC	7W	560mA at 1.2V x 4	280mA at 1.2V for 4	NiMH only	4 x AA	sanyo.com.au
	4	16	114	6 for 2000mAh	2	2	100-240VAC	7W	360mA per slot 2/4	180mA per slot 2/4	NiMH only	2 x AA, 2 x AAA	duracell.com.au
	4	18	220	1 for 2450mAh	1	4	100-240VAC	28W	2.5A at 1.4V x 4	1A at 1.4V for 4	NiMH only	4 x AA	energizer.com.au
	4	15	106	7 for 2000mAh, 9 for 2450mAh	2	1	100-240VAC	6W	360mA at 2.8V for 2	120mA at 2.8V for 2	NiMH only	4 x AA	eveready.com

USING THE TABLE
Price Recommended retail, as of September 2012. **Scores** The overall score is made up of peak temperature during charging cycle (60%) and average temperature during charging cycle (40%). **Note:** the lower the temperature, the higher the score. * Charging battery with 2100mAh capacity. **TABLE NOTES** ns Not stated. **(A)** Charging one battery. **(B)** Charging two batteries. **(C)** LCD panel for each battery charging well.

Nutshell

- CHOICE tests eight cooling-only portable air conditioners, with rated cooling capacities of 3.5kW to 5kW, suitable for rooms up to about 30m².
- They aren't as effective or energy-efficient as most inverter split systems.

Cool head, hot wallet

A portable air con can be a quick cooling fix, but keep an eye on your power bill, warns **Chris Barnes**

When you're sweltering in a hot home on a 35°C day, a portable air conditioner may be a tempting solution. But after a summer of cool relief, the ensuing electricity bill might leave you hot under the collar.

Single-duct models such as those on test, with a duct connected to a window to vent heat from the room, can be very effective at cooling most of the room, but they draw the air from the room (to cool it) and vent some of it outside. This results in warm air from the rest of the home being slowly drawn into the room. So they aren't as effective as split systems, which take air from the outside, cool it and vent it into the room.

Despite being less effective at cooling, portable models can still use as much (or more) power as a similar-capacity split system. You can keep the running cost down by insulating your home and using awnings, blinds or curtains to shield windows, as well as fans – though they don't actually cool the air.

In this test we've introduced an energy efficiency score, based on the power used versus the temperature drop achieved in our test. While several models score well in this respect, this score is only comparative between the tested models – it can't be compared against our scores for split systems (see *CHOICE*, October 2012), which are generally much more efficient.

There's not yet an accepted Australian standard method for measuring the energy efficiency of this type of portable air conditioner – which is why they don't have energy star labels – and we can't test them in the same way we do split systems.

For more details about portable air conditioners, including how we test, go to **choice.com.au/portableairconditioners**

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	Price ($)	Running costs ($)	PERFORMANCE Overall score (%)
Omega Altise OAPC16	900	159	80
Convair CP15W	799	140	72
DeLonghi WE-18INV	1499	140	72
Dimplex DC15	1100	131	72
Omega Altise APC12CVA	650	94	72
Prima PA002K-17C	600	131	69
Midea MPM5-12CRN1-QB4	699	122	68
Sharp CV-P13LJ	799	122	58

USING THE TABLE Price Recommended retail, as of October 2012. between portable and built-in air conditioners. **Measured cooling power** Comparative only; what you actually hear depends on the environment. Wit operating the unit at maximum capacity for four hours per day for three mon **(B)** Not adjustable. **(C)** Manual vertical louvres and oscillating horizontal lou

WHAT TO BUY

80%
Omega Altise OAPC16

GOOD POINTS
- Excellent cooling effectiveness
- Good energy efficiency (for a portable air conditioner)
- Easy to use

BAD POINTS
- Highest power usage in the test (but still comparatively efficient as it delivers excellent cooling capacity)

What to look for

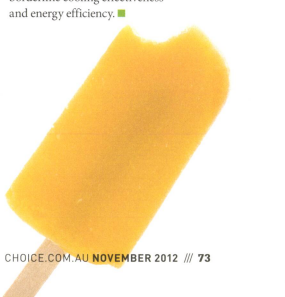
Energy efficiency Single-duct portable air conditioners of the type on test aren't required to have energy star labels. Their energy efficiency ratio (EER) can be calculated by dividing their claimed cooling capacity in kW by their claimed energy input in kW (the greater the EER the better), but this is only a guide as there's no agreed Australian standard on which manufacturers base these claims.
A **window kit** seals off the window while providing a vent for the air conditioner. It's a piece of plastic with a sliding extension inside and an elongated hole for the air conditioner's exhaust hose.
A **drain hose** for draining the water (extracted from the cooled air) which collects in a tank. The Omega Altise OAPC16 comes with a drain hose and tray; the Midea and DeLonghi have a drain hose, and the Dimplex has a tray. The collected water is often reused to assist the cooling function, reducing the need to empty the tank.
Operating modes Cool, automatic, dry (dehumidify) or fan only. The Prima and Dimplex lack the fan-only mode, and the Omega Altise OAPC16 lacks dry mode. The Midea and Dimplex have four fan speeds, while the rest have three. Automatic or "smart" modes mean the unit automatically adjusts the fan speed depending on the ambient and target temperatures (for example, it will use a higher fan speed to cool a hot room faster), and all models have this mode except the Convair and Sharp. The Midea's Follow Me feature means the remote control measures the room temperature and the automatic mode uses that as a target.
Louvres direct airflow and may be manually adjustable to point in one direction, or swing automatically to distribute the airflow evenly (see the table below).

				FEATURES		SPECIFICATIONS					
Ease of use score (%)	Claimed cooling capacity (kW)	Measured cooling power consumption (kWh)	Fan noise on high	Water draining aids	Louvres	Weight (kg)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)*	Length of power cord (m)	Length of duct (m)	Maximum length of window kit (cm)	Contact
73	4.7	1.7	Medium	✓	(A)	36.1	82 x 42 x 38	2.1	1.5	150	omegaaltise.com.au
69	4.4	1.5	Medium		(A)	30.8	85 x 42 x 36	1.8	1.5	108	convair.net.au
65	5	1.5	Medium	✓	(B)	39.6	90 x 50 x 40	1.9	1.1	98	delonghi.com.au
63	4.4	1.4	Medium	✓	(A)	31.7	83 x 53 x 36	1.9	1.3	130	dimplex.com.au
76	3.5	1.0	Quieter		(C)	31.9	77 x 46 x 38	2.0	1.6	97	omegaaltise.com.au
66	5	1.4	Medium		(A)	31.4	85 x 42 x 45	2.0	1.5	126	1300 366 155
61	3.5	1.3	Medium	✓	(D)	38.4	84 x 48 x 36	1.1	1.5	127	mideaair.com.au
71	3.55	1.3	Much quieter		(C)	46.7	85 x 50 x 46	1.6	1.5	212	sharp.net.au

res The overall score is made up of cooling (40%), energy efficiency (30%), ease of use (30%). **Claimed cooling capacity** isn't comparable **sumption** is the power consumed in one hour during the cooling tests. For cooling, this is the average of both cooling tests. **Fan noise** on high; all these air conditioners interfere with normal conversation. **Features** See What to Look For, above. **Running cost** Approximate cost of st weather, based on 26c/kWh. **TABLE NOTES** * Rounded to the nearest centimetre. All models are made in China. **(A)** Manually adjustable only. Oscillating vertical louvres.

About the rest

The **Convair, DeLonghi, Dimplex** and **Omega Altise APC12CVA** are good overall performers and worth considering. The **Prima** has only OK energy efficiency, and the **Midea** is not as easy to use due mainly to inconvenient drainage and filter access. The **Sharp** is let down by borderline cooling effectiveness and energy efficiency. ■



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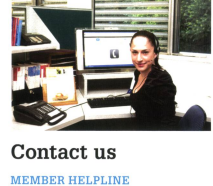

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JUST THE ONE?

Buying one shoe and getting another one free is all well and good, but only if you have two left feet.

HARD WORD

Thanks this month go to Brian Warren, Austen Seccombe, J & N Openshaw, Mike Swain and Graham Hams. If you have any examples you'd like to share with other CHOICE members, send them with your full name to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the unmarked originals.

All good?

But where to hang the bad babies, asks Mike Swain.

EZ Holders

- Easily installed
- Takes most handle sizes
- Two pull out hooks for hanging items
- Simple and efficient mechanism

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It mite hurt...

We can't advise strongly enough against eating through glass just to win a limited edition Vegemite dressing gown.

It's a mad, mad toy world

We'd rather pay the original price, thanks!

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